

Barbara Keys, "The Telephone and Its Uses in 1980s U.S. Activism," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 48, no. 4 (Spring 2018): 485-509. doi.org/10.1162/JINH_a_01196

The Telephone and Its Uses in 1980s U.S. Activism¹

Abstract

Claims that today's digital technologies are unprecedented in their effect on society are founded on a weak understanding of the roles played by pre-digital technologies. Although the landline phone was the most ubiquitous American technology of the twentieth century, and an important influence on social and political life, it has received little attention in most fields of scholarship. But widespread use of the landline telephone is key to explaining how activists in the U.S. Central America movement of the 1980s sustained their commitment and sense of community. Telephony's emotional and sensory qualities, underpinned by the powers of the human voice, were significant factors in the Central America movement's longevity and potency. Communications technology had a profound influence on the character and results of protest movements well before the digital age.

¹ Barbara Keys is Associate Professor of History, University of Melbourne. She is the author of *Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s* (Cambridge, Mass., 2014). The research for this article was funded by an Australian Research Council Discovery Project grant. The author thanks Frank Costigliola, Jack Davies, Petra Goedde, Van Gosse, Patrick Kelly, Brad Simpson, and Keir Wotherspoon for useful suggestions.

Technology, we are told, is reshaping how we work, play, and live—even how our brains are wired. Smartphones and the internet have revolutionized society, commerce, and politics and even revolutionized revolutions, or so enthusiasts and detractors proclaim with equal conviction. Enthusiasts argue that modern technologies enhance freedom and democratize the flow of information, empowering movements such as Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring. Detractors counter that social media and the internet foster “slactivism”—low-risk, low-effort commitments that achieve little other than to make users feel better.²

These claims rest on a weak understanding of communications technologies in the pre-digital age. Before Facebook, the internet, and mobile phones, political activists in many places during the second half of the twentieth century spread their message, recruited adherents, raised funds, and elicited action by using “traditional” technologies, notably print and landline telephony. In studying the communications practices of activists, scholars have focused on the written word because it left abundant trails in archives. Print was essential to activism because it

² Some observers claim that using the internet fosters social relationships; others find that frequent internet use correlates with spending less time with friends and families and that novice users can experience adverse psychological effects. See Steve Love, “The Psychological Dimensions of Mobile Communication: Introduction,” in Rich Ling and Per E. Pedersen (eds.), *Mobile Communications: Re-Negotiation of the Public Sphere* (New York, Springer, 2005), 221. For a study about mobile phones making people lonelier and less connected, see Richard Harper, “The Mobile Interface: Old Technologies and New Arguments,” in Barry Brown et al. (eds.), *Wireless World: Social and Interactional Aspects of the Mobile Age* (New York, 2002), 212; for effects on the brain, Victoria L. Dunkey, “Gray Matters: Too Much Screen Time Damages the Brain,” February 27, 2014, available at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/mental-wealth/201402/gray-matters-too-much-screen-time-damages-the-brain>; for a rosy view of the emancipatory potential of internet and wireless networks, Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Cambridge, 2012); for a critique of cyber-utopianism, Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate the World* (London, 2010).

permitted large amounts of information to be disseminated relatively cheaply and efficiently. But landline telephony was essential, too, although its significance has been almost entirely overlooked.

The phone was important in protest movements from at least the 1950s, when most Americans had landline phones connecting them to local, national, and international telephone networks. Thousands of participants in the Montgomery bus boycott of the mid-1950s, for example, stayed informed by using phone trees. The introduction in 1961 of Wide Area Telephone Service (WATS) lines, which allowed unlimited long-distance calls for a fixed fee, proved to be life-saving for many civil-rights groups, allowing dangerous situations to be reported immediately and field activists to communicate with central offices on a cost-effective basis.³

This article shows how central the phone was, above all in creating and nurturing the relationships and the sense of community that made activism possible, from the vantage point of a particularly long-lasting protest movement, during the decade that marked the acme of landline telephone use, just before the arrival of wireless and digital technologies. It examines telephone use by U.S. activist groups linked in what was called the Central America movement--an informal network of “peace and justice” organizations that mobilized from the late 1970s until

³ For phone use, see Brad Simpson, “Solidarity in an Age of Globalization: The Transnational Movement for East Timor and U.S. Foreign Policy,” *Peace & Change*, XXIX (2004), 460, 464, 471. The two WATS lines that the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) purchased in 1963, one regional and one national, helped local offices to maintain fast and easy contact with headquarters. See Andrew B. Lewis, *The Shadows of Youth: The Remarkable Journey of the Civil Rights Generation* (New York, 2009), 129-130. For the life-saving importance of “WATS reports” to SNCC, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and other civil rights groups, see “WATS and Incidents Reports,” available at www.crmvet.org/docs/wats/watshome.htm.

about 1990. The purpose of the movement was to oppose U.S. interventionism in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala, where bloody civil wars resulted in tens of thousands of deaths and widespread suffering. In these years, 93 percent of Americans had a landline phone. When American Telephone and Telegraph's (AT&T) monopoly on service was dismantled mid-decade, the cost of long-distance calls dramatically diminished. Moreover, computerization at AT&T led to the proliferation of 1-800 calling cards in the 1980s, quickly supplanting WATS lines and allowing activists to charge calls to a central organization. Not surprisingly, the number of phone calls, including conference calls, increased greatly. The millions, even billions, of calls that U.S. Central America activists made powered the movement in countless ways. As activist Dolly Pomerleau, co-director of the Quixote Center, put it, "Without the phone, nothing much would have happened."⁴

The U.S. Central America movement created one of the most protracted and visible political contests of the post-Vietnam War era. According to one assessment, it "mobilized more committed activists, generated more political conflict, sustained itself over a longer period of

⁴ The best overarching analysis of the movement is Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central America Peace Movement* (Chicago, 1996). For anti-Contra war groups, see Roger Peace, *A Call to Conscience: The Anti-Contra War Campaign* (Amherst, 2012). Nearly 300 books contain significant treatment of the Contra war, most of which treat the anti-Contra movement only in passing (248, n. 11). For the emotional dimensions of solidarity work, see Sharon Erickson Nepstad, *Convictions of the Soul: Religion, Culture, and Agency in the Central America Solidarity Movement* (New York, 2004); for "cultural work," Nick Witham, *The Cultural Left and the Reagan Era: U.S. Protest and the Central American Revolutions* (London, 2015); for one of the many studies of particular groups, Susan Bibler Coutin, *The Culture of Protest: Religious Activism and the U.S. Sanctuary Movement* (Boulder, 1993). Thanks go to Van Gosse for information about the increase in phone calls. Telephone interview with Dolly Pomerleau, co-director of the Quixote Center, which raised funds for humanitarian aid to Nicaragua, December 20, 2015. For the percentage of phones, which remained stable across the decade, see Claude S. Fischer, *America Calling: A Social History of the Telephone to 1940* (Berkeley, 1992), 259.

time, and made a greater political impact than [the] anti-nuclear movement of the same decade.” About 1,500 national, regional, and local groups worked on Central American issues, and hundreds of thousands of protesters participated at the grassroots level. Though spurred in part by Central American immigrants and contacts with counterparts in Central America, its U.S. hub was overwhelmingly a movement of middle-class whites; Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish groups were often in the lead. Central America groups helped individual victims and sent humanitarian aid. They had little success in their core goal of stopping U.S. intervention, but they may well have deterred its expansion. At a more fundamental level, they ensured that a powerful critique of U.S. interventionism remained visible in mainstream political discourse. Bickering was endemic--between radical anti-imperialists and moderate anti-interventionists, the faithful and the secular, “old-style” activists and “nuts and raisins” people, blacks and whites, Tucson and Chicago. But what stands out about the movement in retrospect is its scale and longevity, even in the face of FBI surveillance, harassment, attacks in the local press, and sometimes arrest. Scholars have offered a variety of explanations for its size and staying power, including its use of pre-existing church-based networks, the effectiveness of its national organizations, the depth of experience of its leaders, the physical proximity of the battlegrounds, and the moral and emotional resonance of the issues.⁵

⁵ Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, xvii, 119, 124, 199. For the Central American diaspora and Central American revolutionary groups, see Héctor Perla, Jr., “Si Nicaragua Venció, El Salvador Vencerá: Central American Agency in the Creation of the U.S.-Central American Peace and Solidarity Movement,” *Latin American Research Review*, XLIII (2008), 136-158, 214, 336, 344; Gosse, ““The North American Front’: Central American Solidarity in the Reagan Era,” in Mike Davis and Michael Sprinker (eds.), *Reshaping the U.S. Left: Popular Struggles in the 1980s* (New York, 1988), 1-43. Notes from strategy session at Cindy Buhl’s, October 15, 1984, Coalition for a New Foreign Policy Records (the group’s name after a late name change), Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Box 3, Folder: All-Day Meeting, Swarthmore,

This article argues that pervasive use of the landline telephone—in particular, the ways in which activists used the phone to foster community—is crucial to understanding the movement’s operations and the reason why so many people devoted so much energy to it for such a long time. Phone calls created a “psychological neighborhood.” They spread information with astonishing speed, built trust and social capital, circulated emotions and solidified emotional commitments, and created and reinforced networks of social obligation—because the phone is “not simply a mechanical device but a system of social relationships and practices.” Above all, heavy reliance on the landline telephone built a dense connective tissue of personal and emotional ties. In internal work and external lobbying, activists met face-to-face, held conferences, and engaged in demonstrations; they created posters, designed newsletters, wrote letters, and mailed fundraising appeals. Many of these activities were first made possible and then made effective by diligent daily use of the landline, push-button telephone.⁶

Activists combined the written and the spoken word in synergistic ways. Although the phone was a labor-intensive form of communication, it provided immediate personal contact, an opportunity for genuine exchange, and an emotional depth that print lacked. According to Joe Eldridge, the Washington Office on Latin America’s former director, “Print material provided the information; phone calls provided the motivation: the sense of being part of a larger movement, the sense of value, the sense of making an important contribution.” Other movements

Pa. (hereinafter CNFMP); Ross Gelbspan, *Break-Ins, Death Threats, and the FBI: The Covert War against the Central America Movement* (Boston, 1991); Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 119, 124, 199.

⁶ Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, writes that three things “held together” the Central America activist network--“AT&T, the personal computer, and the U.S. Postal Service”--but he spends only one page on the use of the phone (121-122). Sidney Aronson, “The Sociology of the Telephone,” *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, XII (1971), 162; Lana F. Rakow, *Gender on the Line: Women, the Telephone, and Community Life* (Urbana, 1992), 2.

used the phone effectively, but it was an especially potent medium for Central America activists because it cultivated and sustained the underlying emotional resonances of the movement—the “up close and personal” feelings that abuses close to home generated.⁷

Historians now see the 1970s as diffusing more than dissipating the energies of 1960s activism. They have richly analyzed the new political dynamics of progressive activism in the late 1970s and 1980s. Activists of all political stripes were energized by issues close at hand. The actions of what one scholar calls “front porch politics” emerged from personal experiences and the perception of dangerous forces encroaching on homes and lives. Protest against the U.S. contribution to the conflicts in Central America is a case in point. Activists used their homes not just for phone calls but also for events such as house parties to publicize their cause. An emotional repertoire based on a view of “virtuous, sacrificial Central American victimhood” was a key feature of the U.S. Central America movement. The emotional dimension of the conflict—the sense of urgency, the feelings of guilt, and the apparent life-and-death import of taking action—made the voice a particularly potent conduit for activism in this case. Yet U.S. activism across many causes in the 1980s was probably shaped in similar ways by landline telephony.⁸

⁷ Telephone interview with Joseph Eldridge, Washington Office on Latin America, June 24, 2015.

⁸ Robert Surbrug, Jr., *The Politics of Protest in Massachusetts, 1974-1990* (Amherst, 2009); Simon Hall, *American Patriotism, American Protest: Social Movements since the Sixties* (Philadelphia, 2011); Doug Rossinow, *Visions of Progress: The Left-Liberal Tradition in America* (Philadelphia, 2008), 256. For the New Left from 1955 to 1975, see Gosse, *Rethinking the New Left: An Interpretive History* (New York, 2005), which discusses the Central America movement on page 201. Michael Stewart Foley, *The Forgotten Heyday of American Activism in the 1970s and 1980s* (New York, 2013); Patricia Stuelke, “The Reparative Politics of Central America Solidary Movement Culture,” *American Quarterly*, LXVI (2014), 767-790.

In examining the everyday communications practices of political activists, this article also aims to deepen our understanding of how activists sustain movements and what makes them persistent and strong enough to withstand repeated failure. Sociologists have concentrated on “the before and after of collective action”—the factors that propel and result from activism. Historians have been preoccupied with what activists have done--the *Sturm and Drang* of protests, vigils, marches, and campaigns. How activists devised, organized, and sustained such campaigns and how they worked on a day-to-day basis have drawn little attention. Historians have largely ignored activists’ choices about allocating scarce resources and their use of communications technologies. On the one hand, historians and political scientists studying the explosion of transnational human-rights movements in the last decades of the twentieth century, for example, routinely assume the catalytic effects of satellite television, cheap mass-printing technologies, and the growth in commercial jet travel without probing their benefits precisely. On the other hand, social scientists underline the importance of understanding the resource mobilization and organizational dynamics of social movements but only peripherally attend to such mobilizing technologies as direct mail, door-to-door canvassing, and telemarketing.⁹

⁹ Doug McAdam, “Beyond Structural Analysis: Toward a More Dynamic Understanding of Social Movements,” in Mario Diani and *idem* (eds.), *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action* (New York, 2003), 284; Pierre-Yves Saunier, “International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs),” in Akira Iriye and *idem* (eds.), *The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History* (New York, 2009), 574. A key exception to historians’ general lack of interest is their scholarship on the dissident media. See, for example, John McMillan, *Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of an Alternative Media in America* (New York, 2011), which shows that underground newspapers fostered a sense of community. For exceptions that grapple with the role of communications technology and social and political change, see Jonathan Bolton, *Worlds of Dissent: Charter 77, The Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech Culture under Communism* (Cambridge, Mass., 2014); Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York, 2006);

In attending to the phone, we also attend to senses and emotion. Historians have long privileged the visual over other sensory experiences, whereas landline phone use was oral/aural and haptic. Like all human behavior, it was also inherently emotional, carrying not only emotions but also discourses about emotion. Although sociology has for some time recognized the importance of emotions in protest movements, historical study has lagged. Emotions are necessary to build movements and to instigate change, and people choose activism in part to create morally fulfilling and emotionally satisfying lives.¹⁰

The methodological challenges to recapturing the ways in which people used the phone are imposing. Historians usually focus on vigils, letter-writing campaigns, demonstrations, and other actions because they are richly documented. Telephone conversations, however, leave

Robert Darnton, *Poetry and the Police: Communications Networks in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010); for human rights organizing in recent years, Joanne Lebert, “Wiring Human Rights Activism: Amnesty International and the Challenges of Information and Communication Technologies,” in Martha McCaughey and Michael D. Ayers (eds.), *Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice* (New York, 2003), 298-328. Resource-mobilization theory has devoted little attention to *how* activists gathered resources. See Wim van de Donk et al., “Introduction: Social Movements and ICTs,” in *idem* (ed.), *Cyberprotest: New Media, Citizens, and Social Movements* (New York, 2004), 7. For mobilizing technologies, see Pamela E. Oliver and Gerald Marwell, “Mobilizing Technologies for Collective Action,” in Aldon D. Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller (eds.), *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory* (New Haven, 1992), 255-263.

¹⁰ For methods of studying emotion, see Frank Costigliola, “Reading for Emotion,” in *idem* and Michael Hogan (eds.), *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations* (New York, 2016; orig. pub. 1991); for a rare study of communications that covers emotion, James Vincent and Leopoldine Fortunati (eds.), *Electronic Emotion: The Mediation of Emotion via Information and Communication Technologies* (Oxford, 2009). Jeff Goodwin et al., “Emotional Dimensions of Social Movements,” in David A. Snow et al. (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (Malden, 2010), 413-432; James M. Jasper, *The Art of Moral Protest: Culture, Biography, and Creativity in Social Movements* (Chicago, 1997), 338, 342.

almost no trace in the written record. They are almost never recorded or transcribed. Message slips, phone logs, and monthly itemized phone bills rarely make their way into permanent archives. Before the telephone became ubiquitous, organizations debated its utility. More recently, the explosion of cell phones and social media has again fostered reflection about how communications technologies are changing activism. But in the 1980s, such discussions were lacking. Nonetheless, the evidentiary challenges that the telephone presents during that period are surmountable by drawing on insights from psychology, sociology, and the history of technology, and by talking to former activists, attending to hundreds of passing references to the phone in the archival records of different groups, analyzing activists' scattered instructions and guides to phone use, and consulting discussions of telephony in other contexts.¹¹

TELEPHONY IN 1980S ACTIVISM

Imagine the desk of Eleanor Milroy, c. 1985, at 120 Maryland Avenue, directly across from the Capitol Building. Milroy was the Central America Field Director at the Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy (CNFMP), a lobbyist organization in Washington, D.C., representing

¹¹ A notable exception regarding archival material is the Free Speech movement, which, according to William J. Rorabaugh, *Berkeley at War: The 1960s* (New York, 1989), kept “copious phone logs” (197, n. 26). The cataloging of archival materials also matters: For example, the archives for the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (Records M94-308, Wisconsin Historical Society, Box 3, Oregon SR folder, Wisconsin Historical Archives)--all 18.5 cubic feet of them--may contain documents about phone use, but the search engine offers no guidance about where they might be. A folder originally labeled “Communication and Phone Conversations” contains almost nothing relevant. For discussions in the NAACP during the 1940s and 1950s about whether to ask everyone to log and to justify each long-distance call, see Box II: A436 and Box VIII: 421, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Records, Library of Congress Manuscripts Collections, Washington, D.C. The Nicaragua Network was founded as National Network in Solidarity with the Nicaraguan People.

more than fifty mostly religious organizations. Her job was to work with grassroots activists, liaising with groups around the country to coordinate strategies to influence U.S. foreign policy. She spent most of her day on the phone--a corded, push-button, landline phone with a string of buttons for the office's five or so extensions. The handset, attached to the phone with a curled cord, weighed close to half a pound—not much more than an iPhone X, though far bulkier. She had a Rolodex file device with hundreds of small cards in alphabetical order, each containing contact information for a person or an institution.

Before 1984, when long-distance competition started a slow drop in costs, the CNFMP expected phone bills to skyrocket during phone campaigns; it typically paid more in phone bills than it did in rent. After 1984, when falling prices made cost less of a concern, Milroy never considered the price of any call, though she knew that every call came with a price.¹²

By the 1980s, larger businesses often had phone systems with such features as automatic redial, storage of several phone numbers in a memory bank, speakers, and hands-free headsets, but Milroy's phone was more basic. Call waiting had yet to become widespread. Facsimile, or fax, machines, though increasingly common, were costly, and the CNFMP probably did not buy one until later in the 1980s. It had an answering machine that was turned on by the last person out the door in the evening. A few people around the country were beginning to use electronic mail, but CNFMP staff preferred to rely on the phone. Milroy might have read about car phones or

¹² E. T. Klemmer and K. A. Haig, "Weight and Balance of a New Handset," *Applied Ergonomics*, XIX (1988), 271-274, available at <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15676667>. Telephone interview with Eleanor Milroy, December 2, 2015. The details in this section are drawn primarily from Milroy's recollections and archival records (as cited). In 1978, rent was \$4,000; phone bills came to \$5,746. See 1978 Financial Statement, Box 2; "Dear Friend" letter, April 20, 1981, p. 3, Box 14, f. Mailings 1981, CNFMP.

heard about the ARPANET, but the cell phone and the internet would not enter the mainstream for another decade.¹³

For Milroy, as for Americans generally, the phone was indispensable. Staffers in Central America groups recall that in the 1980s they spent half or more of their working time making or answering calls, not unlike many American office workers. When asked how much time he spent on the phone, Segundo Mercado-Llorens, the CNFMP's Human Rights Coordinator in the mid-1980s, replied, "What percentage of the time *didn't* I spend on the phone?! This was the era when dinosaurs roamed the earth. *All* the work was done by phone. If I wasn't in a meeting, I was on the phone. I was constantly on the phone!" His experience was not atypical. Americans used the phone frequently for both business and personal reasons, more frequently than Europeans did. In 1982, nearly half of all Americans talked on the phone with friends or relatives almost every day. In 1986, Americans placed 1.97 billion calls a day, a staggering eight calls for

¹³ "In Home Phones," *Popular Mechanics* (August 1984), 109-110; telephone interview with Segundo Mercado-Lloréns, August 21, 2015. For a useful description of office technologies c. 1989, see Claude Whitmyer, Salli Raspberry, and Michael Phillips, *Running a One-Person Business* (Berkeley, 1989), 73-78, 109-124. The use of fax and telex machines to transmit printed material nearly instantaneously deserves an article of its own but is beyond the scope of this one. Telephone interview with Milroy; Notes, Staff Meeting, March 3, 1986, Box 1, f. Internal, CNFMP. The new computer on the CNFMP's 1986 wishlist was estimated to cost \$5,000, or nearly one-third of a field organizer's annual salary. Staff meeting notes, March 3, 1986, Box 1, f. Internal, CNFMP. For a contemporaneous account of "computer communications," see Judy Smith and Ellen Balka, "Chatting on a Feminist Computer Network," in Cheris Kramarae (ed.), *Technology and Women's Voices: Keeping in Touch* (New York, 1988), 93-94. The first commercial cellular phone system in the United States emerged in 1983. Brown, "Studying the Use of Mobile Technology," in *idem et al.* (eds.), *Wireless World: Social and Interactional Aspects of the Mobile Age* (New York, 2002), 8.

every woman, man, and child--about seven times as many telephone conversations as in 1950--and the number was still rising.¹⁴

The landline phone derived its effectiveness from the capacities of the human voice, “one of our most powerful instruments.” Biologists tell us that one of the major functions of the voice is to promote intimacy. It reveals the physical self by conveying information about gender, age, and even size. It communicates so effectively that listeners can discern emotions in speech even when the words are muffled by walls or camouflaged electronically. It can reveal group identity through inflection, vocabulary, accent, and other verbal markers. It shows “the psychological self”--traits such as earnestness and sincerity—and it can reveal physiological symptoms (for example, inebriation). In the 1970s, after spending an estimated \$500 million on the project, AT&T introduced a picturephone. It flopped. People did not need to see the person on the other end of the line; the voice was powerful enough.¹⁵

¹⁴ Telephone interview with Brewster Rhoads, June 24, 2015; telephone interview with Eldridge; telephone interview with Milroy; telephone interview with Mercado-Lloréns; Johannes Adler, “Telephoning in Germany: Callers, Rituals, Contents and Functions,” *Telecommunications Policy*, XVII (1993), 293; Fischer, *America Calling*, 226, 259; Philip Elmer-DeWitt et al., “Networking the Nation: Computer Grips Link People and Machines,” *Time*, CXXVII, no. 24 (June 16, 1986). By 1987, Americans were spending 3.754 trillion minutes a year on the phone, partly because of the increase in phone services for banking, shopping, and information. See Trish Hall, “With Phones Everywhere, Everyone Is Talking More,” *New York Times*, October 11, 1989, 1.

¹⁵ Anne Karpf, *The Human Voice: The Story of a Remarkable Talent* (New York, 2006), 4; John L. Locke, *The De-Voicing of Society: Why We Don't Talk to Each Other Anymore* (New York, 1998), 25-37; Karpf, *Human Voice*; A. Michael Noll, *Introduction to Telephones and Telephone Systems* (Boston, 1991; orig. pub. 1986), 188-189. Like any other type of communication, the voice can undergo slippage between intent and reception, but the multiplicity of cues in it reduces the prospect for error. For possible differences between what listeners detect and speakers intend, see Derek Rutter, *Communicating by Telephone* (Oxford, 1987), 43.

Phone calls drew their power in part from the ways that the device intertwined the aural and the haptic. The haptic qualities of phone conversations were cleverly encapsulated in the well-known AT&T marketing slogan of the 1980s: “Reach out and touch someone.” Touch and hearing are related; we hear because sonic vibrations touch our eardrums. The sense of touch was intrinsic to landline phone calls, not only because of the weight of the receiver on the ear but because of such technical difficulties as echo and static, especially on long-distance calls, that produced percussive effects on the eardrum. The metaphorical dimensions of reaching out to “touch someone” or “staying in touch” were thus reinforced by sensory inputs. Activists frequently described the effects of phone calls using the language of touch; one CNFMP staff member wrote that she would take calls from anyone who wanted “a hug.” Every call came with a per-minute cost, and most calls involved hand dialing. The cost and the effort help to explain why a telephone call made “people feel wanted, needed, included, and involved” and why calls could overcome “alienation, anomie, and feelings of isolation and rootlessness.” Today a phone belongs to a person; then, it belonged to a place. The physical rootedness of the phone contributed to a caller’s sense of being embedded in a set of relationships rather than floating as an autonomous individual.¹⁶

THE CENTRAL AMERICA MOVEMENT

¹⁶ Staff Meeting, May 7, 1986, Box 22, f. Board, CNFMP. The breakup of AT&T, or “Ma Bell,” in 1984 brought important changes. Local and long-distance services were provided separately, and competition among long-distance carriers brought down prices. See Fischer, *America Calling*, 258. “Telephone Intercoms and Who They Are and Such Things as That,” September 10, 1982, Box 17, CNFMP; Grant Noble, “Towards a ‘Uses and Gratifications’ of the Domestic Telephone,” in Forschungsgruppe Telefontelefonkommunikation (ed.), *Telefon und Gesellschaft* (Berlin, 1990), I, 307; Charles Handy, *The Age of Unreason: New Thinking for a New World* (New York, 1991), 15.

The wellsprings of Central America activism in the United States were outrage and guilt regarding the U.S. government's role in fueling civil wars that were accompanied by murder, massacres, rape, forced displacement, and torture. In Nicaragua, where the socialist Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN, or Sandinistas) had come to power in July 1979 in a popular revolution, the Reagan administration backed the *contrarevolucionarios*, or Contras, who tried to undermine Sandinista rule by destroying crops, attacking villages, and kidnapping, raping, and killing civilians. In El Salvador, the Reagan administration was committed to aiding a right-wing dictatorship that responded to internal pressures for reform with indiscriminate repression, including mass murder. Repression in Guatemala and, to a lesser extent, Honduras also drew attention. What made Americans' response to this situation different from earlier reactions to events in Latin America—say, the outrage about torture and political killing in the Southern Cone during the 1970s, which spurred the growth of human-rights groups--was the mass scale of the suffering, the Reagan administration's brazen participation in it, and the region's proximity.¹⁷

The tactics and aims of the U.S. Central America movement varied from group to group. The Pledge of Resistance gathered thousands of signatures committing people to commit acts of civil disobedience in the event of U.S. military action in Central America. Witness for Peace brought Americans to Nicaragua to bear witness to the effects of U.S. policy. Sanctuary offered illegal refuge to Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees denied official status by the U.S. government. National peace organizations, such as the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE), also took up the cause. The Coalition for a New American Foreign and Military Policy

¹⁷ For good insider introductions, see Cynthia Arnson, *Crossroads: Congress, the Reagan Administration, and Central America* (New York, 1989); William M. LeoGrande, *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977-1992* (Chapel Hill, 1998).

coordinated efforts to block aid to the Contras and end funding that enabled repression in El Salvador by lobbying Congress and influencing public opinion. Notwithstanding the hard-core anti-imperialist groups that eschewed electoral politics, the movement generally acted in concert to pressure Congress against funding the wars and to create a groundswell of public opposition to U.S. intervention, even if only as starting points for deeper social and political changes. Central America groups shared information and resources, held joint “days of action,” promoted common talking points, and worked together on lobbying Congress. The weekly meetings of the CNFMP’s Central America Working Group brought together most of the groups in Washington, D.C., along with sympathetic congressional aides.¹⁸

Because stopping Congress from approving the administration’s funding requests was the basic goal, much of the activity of Central America groups ebbed and flowed around votes taken in congressional subcommittees and committees and on the floor. Given the polarization about policy within Congress, lobbying meant strengthening liberal support and pressuring the dozens of swing voters who held the balance of power. Until 1984, enough members of Congress were concerned about reports of rampant “death squad” atrocities in El Salvador to keep U.S. funding to the junta relatively low, but after Reagan’s landslide re-election in 1984, the legislature effectively relinquished El Salvador policy to the administration.

The drama about funding the Nicaraguan Contras occasioned two-dozen floor votes in six years. After the covert war came to light in 1982, a drumbeat of publicity about abuses, coupled

¹⁸ For overall numbers, see David W. Dent, “Interest Groups,” in *idem* (ed.), *U.S.-Latin American Policymaking: A Reference Handbook* (Westport, 1995), 143; for SANE, Peace, *Call to Conscience*, 84-85. In 1982, the *Congressional Quarterly* called the CNFMP the “nerve center” of congressional work on Central America. See “CNFMP: Year-End Review--1982,” p. 6, Box 22, f. Board, CNFMP. Peace, *Call to Conscience*, 3, 37, 114.

with the administration's illegal mining of Nicaraguan harbors, pushed Congress to limit and then, in October 1984, to curtail aid to the Contras. After Reagan's landslide re-election, Congress first restored "nonlethal" aid and, by 1986, full aid. The momentum shifted again in 1987, when news broke that the Reagan administration had illegally circumvented earlier restrictions in what became known as "the Iran–Contra scandal," and Congress again restricted aid to "nonlethal" categories. Public opinion continued to run strongly against aid to El Salvador and the Contras, helping to explain why Congress was willing to confront a popular administration. Although activism regarding El Salvador continued into the 1990s, the 1990 Nicaraguan elections that saw the Sandinistas unexpectedly voted out of power marked the point at which the Central America movement lost energy, its reduced ranks merging into a broader network of groups working on Latin America.¹⁹

Recourse to the landline phone was fundamental to almost all the work of Central America groups during the 1980s. Activists organized vigils, wrote newsletters, gave talks and poetry readings, held face-to-face meetings, organized sit-ins, attended conferences, screened films, and went to Central America in volunteer work brigades. Almost invariably, they coordinated these events by phone. Even after sending invitations to a house meeting, for example, organizers were supposed to follow up with calls. "This is one of the most important steps," one instructional guide emphasized. "People need this personal contact." The idea was that print alone would not succeed unless combined with the personal contact that phone calls

¹⁹ William M. LeoGrande and Philip Brenner, "The House Divided: Ideological Polarization over Aid to the Nicaraguan 'Contras,'" *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, XVIII (1993), 106; Peace, *Call to Conscience*, 4-5, 241; LeoGrande et al., "Grappling with Central America: From Carter to Reagan," in *idem*, Morris Blachman, and Kenneth Evan Sharpe (eds.), *Confronting Revolution: Security through Diplomacy in Central America* (New York, 1986), 320.

made possible. “To move people to action, you have to ask them personally,” Brewster Rhoads, the CNFMP’s former director, recalled.²⁰

The millions of phone conversations that were the lifeblood of the movement in the 1980s did far more than share information. At the most basic level, they built relationships. Activists tend to be drawn into movements by people whom they know, but we know far less about what sustains activists once they are in a movement. For the 1980s, at least, the phone is central to explaining how movements built momentum once they took flight. Phone calls nurtured the social ties that generate activism. Sociologists of social movements have done much to elucidate the importance of social networks in providing a space in which everyday interactions create meaning and shape individual perceptions and cognitive frames. Network ties promote friendship and assistance, as well as the exchange of ideas, resources, and support. As one Pledge of Resistance manual put it in 1986, “A community empowers itself for a long-term struggle not so much through developing ‘winning strategies,’ but through the intense bonds of dedication and love that link each of us with the larger resistance movement and with the people of Central America.” Tilly underlines the importance of “talk” among activists: “Conversation in general shapes social life by altering individual and collective understandings, by creating and transforming social ties, by generating cultural materials that are then available for subsequent social interchange, and by establishing, obliterating, or shifting commitments on the part of

²⁰ “House Meeting Check List,” in untitled brochure, n.d., Box 4, Folder 31, Nicaragua Network Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison (hereinafter NN]. See also “How to Organize a Local Network Meeting,” n.d., Box 1, CNFMP. Telephone interview with Rhoads.

participants.” If, as he argues, activism subsists on continued “conversations,” in the 1980s, the telephone literally made most of these conversations possible.²¹

Activists reflecting on their work in the 1980s uniformly emphasize the importance of human contact. Face-to-face contact was the best means to build a personal relationship, but what the Pledge manual said about meetings also was true of phone calls: “Through them we communicate not merely information, but a whole set of counter values and ways of being. . . . [P]eople come, not simply to make ‘rational individual’ decisions, but to meet the people who are engaged in resistance . . . [and to look] for community.” Milroy recalls that she rarely met the people to whom she spoke, but she developed rich personal relationships with many of them. One Bay Area activist called her at 9 A.M. every day for an exchange of information and support. As she describes it, mutual exchange was critical to shaping strategies and to creating more sophisticated messages—whether about how to sway congressional votes or how to pitch issues to local media.²²

Sometimes groups *formed* because the phone made organizing possible. In 1983, when the Carolina Interfaith Task Force on Central America could not find a national group to endorse the idea of sending volunteers to the border to “stand with the Nicaraguan people,” it worked the

²¹ Roger V. Gould, “Why Do Networks Matter? Rationalist and Structuralist Interpretations,” in Diani and McAdam (eds.), *Social Movements and Networks*, 236. For social ties and networks in general, see Diani, “Networks and Social Movements: A Research Programme,” in *ibid.*, 303. “No Mandate for War: A Pledge of Resistance Handbook,” 1986, 83, available at <http://www.reclaimingquarterly.org/web/handbook/DA-Handbk-Pledge86-lo.pdf>; Tilly, unpub. paper, quoted in Ann Mische, “Cross-talk in Movements: Reconceiving the Culture-Network Link,” in Diani and McAdam (eds.), *Social Movements and Networks*, 263.

²² “No Mandate for War,” 39; telephone interview with Milroy. Milroy’s performance evaluation commended her for building “positive relations” in the human-rights community. See Eleanor Milroy Performance Evaluation, December 1986, Box 1, f. Board 1986-1987, CNFMP.

phones day and night for weeks to get Witness for Peace off the ground. “I have no idea what the phone bills were,” one participant reflected, “but it paid off.” One of the national founders of Pledge of Resistance recalled that he and one other person built a national infrastructure in two weeks of phone calls in 1984: “[We] just started calling contacts until we had state coordinators across the country.”²³

The phone was a necessary everyday tool. Staff and volunteers called other people in the organization—often national-level staff communicating with the grassroots, for example—as well as journalists, elected officials, potential donors, and others. For some groups, the phone was the most important vehicle for getting prompt and accurate information from Central America. Nicaragua Network, for example, was in regular phone contact with Managua. For the CNFMP, calls were largely about monitoring Congress, updating information, and trying to coordinate the efforts of myriad groups. In 1982, its human-rights staff fielded about fifteen calls a day from local organizers about Central American issues. During special campaigns, the number rose to hundreds. Milroy describes her phone calls as partly about “making people feel like insiders” by sharing with them inside information from Washington, D.C., that they could not get from reading the newspaper.²⁴

As with any other skill, some people were better on the phone than others. Communications researchers during the 1980s referred to the existence of a “telephone personality”—a type of person especially comfortable with the phone. Pomerleau, who oversaw

²³ Ed Griffin-Nolan, *Witness for Peace: A Story of Resistance* (Louisville, 1991), 29; Pledge of Resistance founder quoted in Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 112.

²⁴ See archival description of finding aid at <http://bit.ly/1nLW9GU>, NN. “Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy: Year-End Review--1982,” p. 6, Box 22, f. Board, CNFMP; telephone interview with Milroy.

phone operations for the Quixote Center throughout the 1980s, recalled that John Judge, her most effective caller, had an uncanny ability to make his interlocutors feel good. As Pomerleau recalled, Judge was “personal without being gabby,” capable of eliciting a donation from anyone and conveying appreciation no matter how small the donation. Although one study found that women activists sometimes felt that men took credit for work that women did, women do not appear to have worked the phones more often, or to have gravitated to them more readily, than men did. Gender differences may have appeared in men’s and women’s presentation and reception, but neither the documents nor the interviewees suggest any differences in the effectiveness with which men or women used the phone.²⁵

PHONE BANKS AND PHONE TREES

Phone banks U.S. Central America groups had a sophisticated repertoire of phone-based activities that drew from widely known tactics, passed down and refined for decades, and they shared tips and instructional manuals. One of the most important of these tactics was the telephone bank, which brought together a number of people in one place to make calls for a specific purpose. In the 1980s, phone banks were an indispensable tool for political campaigns, non-profit organizations, grassroots groups, and other associations, to get out the vote, to fundraise, to recruit, and to elicit action. When a Central America group did not have enough phones in its own office, it would borrow space (and phones) from churches, unions, or sympathetic businesses. Groups learned how to phone bank from each other or from

²⁵ Herbert S. Dordick, “The Social Uses of the Telephone--a U.S. Perspective,” in Forschungsgruppe Telefonkommunikation (ed.), *Telefon und Gesellschaft*, 233; telephone interview with Pomerleau; Robin Lorentz, *Women in the Sanctuary Movement* (Philadelphia, 1991), 55-56, 85-86. For cultural expectations around women’s use of the phone, see Rakow, *Gender on the Line*.

professionals. The Quixote Center, for example, which initially hired a professional phone-banking firm, had learned by the early 1980s to set up its own phone banking.²⁶

Like direct mail, a fundraising and recruiting tool that first became popular in the 1970s, phone banks targeted sympathetic audiences. Typically, the calling lists began with an organization's donor and mailing lists, permitting phone bank volunteers to be reasonably confident that they would reach sympathetic people. Hostile responses were rare. When an organization started with a mailing list that did not include phone numbers, a preliminary step was often to enlist a group of volunteers to "do a marathon looking up of phone numbers," because, as one group put it, "having phone [numbers] can be invaluable to ... future organizing and fundraising."²⁷

Today, phone banks use highly efficient, computerized dialing systems that can filter out such time wasters as busy signals, answering machines, and disconnected lines. Political campaigns often hire telephone contact firms to write the scripts and make the calls. A phone bank run by an activist organization in the 1980s, however, confronted a much different

²⁶ Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York, for example, set up phone banks for a 1988 campaign at Madre, Riverside Church, and Local 259 United Auto Workers (UAW). Letter, "re: Organizing opposition to Feb. 3rd contra aid vote," January 16, 1988, Box 4, f. 24, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York, NN. See also phone bank instructions in National Women's Political Caucus (U.S.), Subseries A, 283.19 "EMPOWER: Basic phoning guide," c.1990; 283.20 "EMPOWER: Phone scripts, 1987-1990," Schlesinger Library, Cambridge, Mass. Telephone interview with Pomerleau.

²⁷ For the origins of direct mail, see Richard A. Viguerie and David Franke, *America's Right Turn: How Conservatives Used New and Alternative Media to Take Power* (Chicago, 2004). "Phone Banking-- Making Ma Bell Work For You" [c. 1987], Box 20, f. Phone Bank "How To," CNFMP. This document seems to have been circulated widely. See also Box 4, f. 24, NN. "Introduction to Gathering Hotline Mailgrams," January 16, 1988, Box 4, Folder 24, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York, NN.

situation. By then, most phones were push-button rather than rotary-dial, but callers needed to enter the numbers by hand, a process that took time and was subject to error. Although calls from phone banks took place when people were expected to be home but not eating a meal, they commonly met with a busy signal, no answer, a wrong number, a disconnected number, or an answering machine.²⁸

Groups organized phone banks not only to fundraise but also to generate action—often, in the form of more phone calls. The 1987 “Days of Decision” campaign, mobilized by a coalition of religious groups to stop aid to the Contras, combined house meetings, letters, newspaper advertisements, visits to members of Congress, petitions, and phone calls. President Reagan’s first request for aid to the Contras triggered a forty-eight-hour blitz of phone calls, many generated via phone-bank campaigns. “Days of Decision” phone-bank participants asked supporters to send a fifty-word, hotline mailgram--also known as an opinion or o-gram—via Western Union to a Congressperson. In the mid-1980s, mailgrams cost \$4.50 each, charged to an individual’s phone bill. Because their cost demonstrated a sender’s relatively high level of commitment and because they could be timed to arrive before key votes, activist groups judged mailgrams to be just as valuable as personal letters. Supporters could call a Western Union phone number, provide a specific operator number, and authorize a mailgram with a fixed text to be sent to a Congressperson in their name. Western Union operators could even verify the name of the caller’s Congressperson by using the caller’s zip code. Callers often asked people to allow

²⁸ Judith S. Trent and Robert V. Friedenberg, *Political Campaign Communication: Principles and Practices* (New York, 2008; orig. pub. 1983), 366; “Phone Banking--Making Ma Bell Work For You” [c. 1987], Box 20, Phone Bank “How To,” CNFMP.

them to authorize mailgrams on their behalf, which they could do by giving Western Union a list of telephone numbers and the corresponding account holder names.²⁹

The appeals from phone banks and written letters both attempted to convey a need for an immediate action that would achieve a tangible outcome, but phone-bank calls had an additional goal that print materials could not achieve--establishing a personal, emotional exchange with each interlocutor to generate feelings of trust, obligation, and pleasure. A sample phone script for a phone bank typically had the caller introduce himself or herself and then leap to convey the urgent necessity for action: "We're calling right now because we're in the middle of an emergency effort to prevent further aid to the Contras.... We have a unique opportunity to directly challenge the current policy and cut the aid—but acting right away is crucial. Have you been following the aid votes?... Rep. _____ needs to hear from each of us right away."³⁰

The question allowed people to respond to the caller—"to indicate recognition, interest, approval, or to ask questions." If callers were able to elicit trust from recipients, half of the task was already achieved; trust offered a mental shortcut to explaining in depth why the action in question was urgent or appropriate. Phone bank organizers knew how to use personal connections to build trust and obligation. As a Center for Democracy in the Americas instructional guide stated, "People give for 3 reasons: (1) they like you--because you are friendly and conversational with them, and you listen to them when they say something and respond to

²⁹ Griffin-Nolan, *Witness for Peace*, 190; "Phone Banking--Making Ma Bell Work For You" [c. 1987], Box 20, f. Phone Bank "How To," CNFMP. The steps were to call Western Union on a toll-free 800-number, ask for a hotline operator, and provide a specific account number. See "Introduction to Gathering Hotline Mailgrams," January 16, 1988, Box 4, f. 24, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York, NN. The basic mailgram had been introduced in 1970.

³⁰ "Sample Phone Script for Mailgram Phone Bank," n.d., Box 20, Folder: Phone Bank "How To," CNFMP.

what they've said, (2) you asked them to give, and (3) they like [our organization]. Of the 3 reasons, the first is the most important--they are, more than anything else, giving the money to *you*.”³¹

Phone bankers worked hard to establish a personal connection with callers, to show empathy, and to listen attentively to the emotional cues in voices. “Responding to the person you are talking to immediately draws him or her in,” one set of instructions noted. If a caller reached someone who sounded tired, a recommended response might be, “Long day, huh?” As Rhoads put it, drawing on haptic metaphors, “Nothing beats an interaction that is high-touch—when you feel like somebody is reaching out to you and asking you to do something really important that affects lots of people. A phone call can convey a sense of mission and urgency that is hard to get from email. It’s about the psychology of human motivation: once you have a relationship, you don’t want to disappoint the other person.”³²

Phone-bank organizers were keenly aware of the power of the human voice to convey emotions. A ubiquitous mantra in phone banking was “Smile: people can hear it.” Voice contact can attract a powerful array of physical and emotional responses. We know, for example, that the timbre and register of the human voice can have a strong effect on our emotions. The voice brings texture, meaning, and depth to information. A telephone manual from these years offered

³¹ “Instructions for Phoners,” [1988], Box 4, Folder 24, Nicaragua Solidarity Network of Greater New York, NN. For phone fundraising in general, see Mal Warwick et al., *999 Tips, Trends and Guidelines for Successful Direct Mail and Phone Fundraising* (Berkeley, 1993), 244-245. Roy J. Lewicki and Chad Brinsfield, “Trust Research: Measuring Trust Beliefs and Behaviors,” in Fergus Lyon et al. (eds.), *Handbook of Research Methods on Trust* (Northampton, Mass., 2015), 57-59; instructional sheet, “What to Say When,” n.d., Box 2, f. 90, Center for Democracy in the Americas, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison. See also the description of phone banking in “No Mandate for War,” 69-70.

³² Nicaragua Network, Box 4, f. 31, NN; telephone interview with Rhoads.

a common observation: “Sometimes the tone of voice we use over the telephone is more important than the actual message our words convey.” The aforementioned John Judge from the Quixote Center had a deep, resonant voice that seemed to admit no refusal. As one caller told him, “How could I turn you down? You have the voice of God!”³³

Organizations used phone banks to build community as well as to raise money or motivate action. Phone-bank volunteers were supposed to bond over snacks, drinks, and a shared sense of purpose. An ideal phone bank ended with the organization’s goals achieved, not just in money raised or telegrams sent, but in sustaining a sense of purpose and idealism among volunteers and their interlocutors. Soliciting by phone occurred in groups because it was too demanding to be done alone; phone bankers depended both on group support and the peer pressure generated from knowing that final tallies would be subject to comparison. Guides to setting up phone banks consistently emphasized the importance of creating the right mood for callers and fostering a sense of community and achievement: “[Participating in a phone bank] offers volunteers an update, training, feedback to improve their skill, comraderie [sic], and most important, a sense of accomplishment.” A typical phone bank session began with 30 to 60 minutes of training, intended not only to impart basic information but also to encourage “the right frame of mind for phoning.” Ideal training was intended to “inspire” volunteers and to “make everyone feel it is a special event.” “Remember, you are not bothering people. You are courageously serving them.” “*Feel great,*” urged another guide.³⁴

³³ “Instructions for Phoners,” Box 4, f. 31, NN; Karpf, *Human Voice*; Decker, *Effective Telephone Communications Skills*, 10; telephone interview with Pomerleau.

³⁴ Melina Wenner, “Smile: It Could Make You Happier,” *Scientific American*, September 1, 2009, available at <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/smile-it-could-make-you-happier/>. This

Phone Trees Whereas phone banks activated supporters who required coaxing, phone trees activated those who were already committed. As one Pledge organizer explained, “Ten people would call ten people who would call ten people.... The system worked amazingly well.” The Albany Pledge headquarters, for example, had thirty-nine lists of ten names or so each in its city-wide phone tree; the thirty-nine names at the top of each list were the “signal group” that activated the trees. Pyramid phone trees or phone chains had been a staple tool of activists for decades. They were “part of activist culture,” dating back at least to the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott. They were used extensively in the civil-rights and free-speech activism of the 1960s and the human-rights, women’s, and environmental movements of the 1990s. By the time Central America activists started mobilizing, they could draw from left-wing experience in creating and maintaining effective phone trees. They knew to use them regularly but not to overuse them: The aim was to keep them fresh and up-to-date but not to wear out their status as instruments for urgent efforts.³⁵

observation was reinforced by some of the interview data. Interview with DeWeese Parkinson.

“Instructions for Phoners,” n.d., Box 4, f. 31, NN; “Phone Banking,” 4.

³⁵ Telephone interview with Rhoads; interview with Taylor, quoted in Smith, *Resisting Reagan*, 122; Handwritten Notes, “How the Phone Tree Works,” November 1990, Box 10, Pledge of Resistance (Albany chapter) Records, Swarthmore Peace Collection, Swarthmore, Pa. (hereinafter POR); telephone interview with Cathie DeWeese Parkinson, formerly of the Portland Central America Solidarity Committee, March 6, 2016; Paul Harvey, *Freedom’s Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill, 2005), 178. About 62% of American households owned a telephone in 1950 and by 1990, more than 95%. See Peyton L. Wynns, *The Changing Telephone Industry: Access Charges, Universal Service, and Local Rates, June 1984* (Washington, D.C., 1984), 57. The SNCC used an elaborate statewide phone network during Mississippi’s Freedom Summer, and student free-speech activists in Berkeley in the 1960s borrowed the technique. See Rorabaugh, *Berkeley at War*, 72. For the use of phone trees among conservative groups, see Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York,

Before email use and internet access were widespread, the phone tree was one of the quickest and most efficient ways to disseminate information quickly. Activists relying on a well-organized phone chain could generate thousands of phone calls to Congress within a day or two or enlist thousands of people for demonstrations or other actions. For example, on March 26, 1985, when the Nicaraguan Embassy called the Quixote Center to say that a pro-Contra demonstration was planned for March 27, the Center's leaders called other local groups to activate phone trees and phone lists. Within a few hours, 150 Contra-aid opponents agreed to turn up the next day to oppose an equal number of pro-Contra demonstrators.³⁶

Most local groups had relatively sophisticated phone-tree operations. The Catholic lobby group Network had national and state-level coordinators who could activate local phone chains with specific requests, such as to call a legislator about a pending bill. If the details of the message were unclear, a recipient could call a pre-recorded "telephone chain action alert message" at the national office.³⁷

Being part of a phone tree could be energizing and empowering. As in phone banks, callers tried not only to convey information but to "mak[e] a personal contact": "Be Personal. (Your warmth will get them there.)" Eldridge describes activating a phone tree as like watching "phone networks light up in outrage." To be in a phone tree was to experience the feeling of

2001), 471; for the women's movement, Maryann Barkso, *Governing NOW: Grassroots Activism in the National Organization for Women* (Ithaca, 2004), 95. See Mobilization for Survival's seven-page guide, "Maintaining an Effective Phone Tree," Box 10, POR. For phone trees, see also McHale, *Communicating for Change*, 48. "Dear [blank]" phone tree letter, August 1, 1987, Witness for Peace Records, Box 13, Swarthmore Peace Collection, Swarthmore, Pa.

³⁶ "Pro-Sandinistas, Opponents March," *Washington Post*, 28 March 1985; telephone interview with Pomerleau; Peace, *Call to Conscience*, 163.

³⁷ Guide, "Network Organizing: The Telephone Chain," n.d., Box 1, CNFMP.

being linked to others. When they worked well, they bonded participants emotionally with like-minded people.³⁸

A similar, pre-internet form of dispensing information quickly to many people was the telephone hotline. Central America hotlines were recorded messages available on a dedicated line, which anyone could call at any time of day for the latest news about developments in Congress or about campaigns underway. The CNFMP, for example, tape-recorded a “legislative hotline update” every few days, which groups around the country frequently accessed. In 1987, when House Speaker Jim Wright came out in favor of aid to the Contras, the hotline urged sympathizers to activate phone trees to generate calls to Wright’s office “expressing outrage.” CNFMP designated a particular Monday as a “national day for call-ins,” urging people to “call now and call again on Monday.” The “call in day” was a success: Wright’s phone lines were “busy constantly.”³⁹

THE POWER OF THE PHONE CALL

Calling people and mailing printed material were the two major forms of communication for activist groups in the 1980s. As one organizer instructed, any group, no matter how small, should have a newsletter. “People need to feel connected; otherwise, it gets lonely out there, and we are in the business of building community as well as organizations.” The CNFMP sent an extensive

³⁸ “Dear Caller” letter, March 14, 1985, Box 10, POR; telephone interview with Eldridge.

³⁹ The term *hotline* was more commonly applied for advice centers, which provided anonymous counseling about marriage, drug and alcohol problems, and much else. The Central America hotline was more like a free 900 number. (that is, a pay-per-call service that offered conversation or information). Hall, “With Phones Everywhere.” In her interview, Milroy recalled that the hotline, located in her office, activated frequently. Hotline text, September 4, 1987; hotline text, September 22, 1987, Box 1, f. “Hotline: recent,” CNFMP.

range of materials on a regular basis--informational fliers that were designed to have a shelf life of twelve to eighteen months, action guides, background mailings, "Action Alerts" with short deadlines, a quarterly newsletter, and fundraising letters. By 1986, given the lower cost of long-distance calls, mailings had become a much larger portion of the budget than phone calls.⁴⁰

An informational mailing went through several stages. For a mailing about a 1980 vote taken by the United Nations, the text was drafted, discussed, revised, and finalized in typewritten form, taking about eighty hours of staff time (charged for internal purposes at \$5.00 per hour). The text then went to a printer, emerging as a two-sided letter at a cost of 4 cents each. Envelopes for each letter cost nearly double that price. The cost of printing each label using a computer service was about 2 cents. Given the addition of postage and the hiring of a mailing house to stuff and stamp the envelopes, each two-page letter of a 5,000-piece mailing cost 27 cents (not including staff time); the total expense was \$1,740.00, or nearly \$3,500 in today's dollars. Mailings were expensive, but they were efficient. Even considering the hours spent stuffing and sealing envelopes (often done in "working bees" over a few beers), a mailing could reach far more people with far less effort than individual phone calls could.⁴¹

Having begun with a strategy of relying almost entirely on print materials to keep in touch with the grassroots, the CNFMP shifted in the early 1980s to a more expensive, phone-based fieldwork strategy to work in a "more personalized, intensified, and carefully targeted way."

⁴⁰ "Waging Peace Conference, Harvard University, May 1-2, 1981," Box 4, f. 31, NN; Letter, Cindy Buhl to Mike [no last name], November 24, 1980, Box 8, f. Correspondence, CNFMP. See the 1986 Budget (\$127,400 for printing and postage, \$15,000 for direct mail, and \$18,250 for phone), November 19, 1985, Box 1, f. Internal, CNFMP.

⁴¹ "Budget: Resources and Mailing on Kampuchean U.N. Vote," Attachment, Buhl to Clareman, August 6, 1980, Box 8, f. Correspondence, CNFMP. The "working bees" comment comes from the interview with Rhoads.

Milroy recalled that phone conversations were much more powerful vehicles for storytelling than were print materials. In the mid-1980s, the CNFMP found that some of the Salvadorans whom it brought to Washington to speak with legislators, journalists, and activist groups were murdered when they returned home. Although the CNFMP newsletters reported these murders, only phone calls conveyed their full emotional force. Milroy had to *talk* about the murders of people whom she knew, sometimes shedding tears. When Central American activists were faced with such powerfully emotional events, their first impulse was often to pick up the phone.⁴²

Critics of digital media today generally find that contemporary technologies corrode human relationships. According to one study, the generation that has grown up with smart phones, which have become devices not for enabling but for avoiding talk, lack empathy and struggle to form friendships based on trust. One analyst recently warned that people who favor online communication tend toward narcissism. When it comes to movements for social change, the shortcomings of the “Twitter revolutions” are now all too apparent. Wael Ghonim, an Egyptian whose anonymous Facebook page in 2011 helped to launch the revolution that toppled a dictatorship, identifies five core problems with social media, based on his own experiences: the unchecked spread of rumor, the creation of isolating echo chambers, the simplification of complex issues, and the discouragement of empathy and genuine exchange. “It’s as if we agreed that we are here to talk at each other instead of talking with each other,” he says.⁴³

⁴² Memo from Brad to the new CNFMP editor/resource coordinator, December 1978, and Memo by Cynthia Buhl, “Coalition Resources and Working our Networks,” n.d., Box 1, Folder: Board, 1986-1987, CNFMP; telephone interview with Milroy.

⁴³ Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York, 2015); Joseph M. Reagle, Jr., *Reading the Comments: Likers, Haters, and Manipulators at the Bottom of the Web*

In considering how Central America activists talked *with* each other to achieve their goals, one other emotional dimension of communications technology is worth noting. Central America groups often tried to harness anger at the policies of the Reagan administration and fear of the effects of U.S. intervention to motivate action. Anger and fear can be powerful motivators, but according to social-psychology researchers, they are negative emotions that have narrowing effects, limiting the horizons of those who experience them. Phone calls, however, were more likely to elicit positive emotions, such as feelings of connection, pride, gratitude, a sense of elevation, and happiness. As one local volunteer put it, “We loved what we were doing.” Social psychology suggests that all human beings, whether extroverted or introverted, feel invigorated after connecting with other people. Phone calls created a tangible, tactile *sense* of community that deepened through one-on-one conversation and the auditory experiences associated with listening to the human voice. Although the emotions produced by a call lasted only a few seconds or a few minutes, the cumulative effects could linger. Such calls represent the type of activity that social psychologists see as “transform[ing] people for the better,” making them more optimistic and resilient and broadening their mindsets. Nineteen-eighties activists say that talking allowed them to experience connections they would otherwise have missed, enhanced their personal commitment to the cause and to one another, made them feel part of “something bigger,” and generated feelings of trust, gratification, solidarity, and achievement. The landline

(Cambridge, Mass., 2015); Wael Ghonin, “Let’s Design Social Media that Drives Real Change,” TED Talk, December 2015, available at <http://bit.ly/1Zvek4J>. Voice contact remains important even in movements powered or facilitated by the internet. In Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring, protestors occupied public spaces, where the bullhorn replaced the phone for spreading voice-mediated messages. Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, 229.

phone, primitive as it seems now, was in some respects more powerful than today's "smart" phone.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ One example of harnessing a negative emotion is a Pledge of Resistance brochure, subtitled "To Prevent the Invasion of Central America; The Lives of the Children Depend on It," [c. 1987], Box 2, f. "National Pledge of Resistance," CNFMP. Interview with DeWeese-Parkinson; Barbara Frederickson, "The Power of Positive Emotions," *American Scientist*, XCI (2003), 334; telephone interview with Milroy.