

The Wonderful VOICEGRAM;
Let's Hope it Won't Be
Another 'French' Telephone

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I expect that most readers have not heard about the VOICEGRAM. I fear that most older readers, along with me, will never be able to use it. The reason they won't explains the title of this essay.

The VOICEGRAM has been succinctly described by Mr. C. Raymond Kraus, the man who conceived it, as one of "a whole family of new one-way services which are urgently needed to fill the communications time-gap between the telephone and the mail. One of these is the VOICEGRAM, a short one-way message service between any two telephones which is fast, reliable, inexpensive, accurate. This service would replace the telegram and supplement the telephone and mail."¹

VOICEGRAM is simplicity itself—in concept and technology—as many other wonderful things have been. Let's assume for the moment that VOICEGRAM is actually available. When you try to make a phone call, but find the line is busy or doesn't answer, you can switch to VOICEGRAM by using a code like an area-code number. You then dial again the number you called, say what you want to say, and hang up. VOICEGRAM records what you say, and computer-stores it in digital form. According to your instructions for delivery of the message, VOICEGRAM delivers it as soon as the number you called is free, or at a later time you have specified—early the same evening, the next morning—by ringing the number and announcing that a VOICEGRAM message from you is about to be transmitted. Instructions for delivery-time can be given after you've given the VOICEGRAM code, a simple *AI* for immediate delivery perhaps, and something as straightforward as the date and time for anything else.

Mr. Kraus's description above is good enough as far as it goes. But it hardly does justice to the potential of VOICEGRAM. Bearing in mind the state of many components of our communications systems, I find his brief description completely inadequate.

Not long ago a man on horseback carried a letter over a considerable distance and did

better than the United States Postal Service. Only the law impedes many eager entrepreneurs from undertaking to compete with the official first-class mail. You can get no guarantee that a telegram will be delivered anywhere, even when a telephone is used locally at both sending and receiving stations, in less than four hours. It often takes several days if the telephone is not used. A United States Congressman, also on horseback, is reported to have delivered a message during rush-hour New York morning traffic before the same message arrived via the telegraphic service at whose office he'd left it before taking to saddle.

There is only the telephone for an immediate message, unless both you and the person you want to contact have Telex terminals at your disposal wherever both of you happen to be at any time. That would be unusual, to say the least. But all too often the telephone can't be used for an immediate message. The person you want to talk with doesn't answer, is talking with someone else, or isn't there. On the other hand, and equally critical, the telephone is always there when you *want* to use it, but perhaps should not—when anger or impatience or other stress impels you to talk *at* someone immediately—when it would likely be wiser to wait until you've calmed down, sobered up, reconsidered, etc.

But despite its potential, on which my own communications euphoria gladly elaborates below, the VOICEGRAM may become another 'French' telephone.

Have you ever wondered why a 'French' telephone is called a 'French' telephone—or at least used to be. Younger people especially may not know the answer, or even recognize the name. For virtually all telephones today are what used to be called in the United States 'French' telephones, that is, in *Webster's* one-word definition, a *handset*—a telephone with mouthpiece and earpiece in a single unit, manageable with one hand. The 'French' telephone, or handset, leaves one hand free for whatever the phone call necessitates or interrupts—making a note of the call, for example, or holding a

lady's hand until the bother of the phone call is disposed of. I have little doubt that the still-lingering exotic and erotic connotations of the word *French* helped in delay of the handset's manufacture in the United States, a country at about the same time Puritanical enough to tolerate absolute and Constitutional prohibition of alcoholic beverages. It was no particularly French mania for a free hand that gave the 'French' telephone its name. It was our telephone company's unshakable belief (in that matter, as in others before and since) that it knew what was best for its captive consumers. The 'handset' was introduced on the continent long before our telephone company finally gave in and permitted manufacture of a 'French' telephone for the American market, where, as worldwide, it finally replaced the older model with its jonquil mouthpiece and earpiece on a cord.

VOICEGRAM is something we should have now, could have now, but I'm afraid won't get now, because it is too radical a change for any monopoly like the telephone service. Many people do want VOICEGRAM. We have evidence of that. They are simulating it every day. Every telephone answering service or device is part of that simulation. Every recorded and mailed tape-cassette letter is part of that simulation. And, in the final analysis, every higher priced person-to-person call is also part of that simulation.

The VOICEGRAM could turn out to be another 'French' telephone if it is adopted abroad before enough of us in the United States have compelled the Bell System to listen to us.

I am tempted to rhapsodize about the VOICEGRAM system's use, but should first point out something about it that is extremely important. As some readers may already appreciate, VOICEGRAM to a great extent mitigates the results of a terrible flaw in the concept of the telephone itself—the absolute egocentricity that the telephone embodies. The telephone caller thoughtlessly assumes—unless prior arrangement has been made by means of an earlier egocentric unarranged call—that the person called will be (1) where he's expected to be, (2) willing to receive the call, (3) disposed to give it as much time as it may require. In truth that is rarely the case. But the 'best telephone service in the world' has conditioned all of us as thoroughly as any laboratory animal has ever been conditioned. Few things command the irresistible 'conditioned response' that a ringing telephone does. It is a rare person, usually one with a reputation for eccentricity, who can ignore one. VOICEGRAM, in addition to other benefits, may break the spell.

The potential benefits are delightful. Have you ever as a business person, or teacher, or researcher, or just plain well-organized human being, tried to make a regular practice of scheduling all telephone communication for a certain hour of the morning or afternoon? Has it ever really worked? If it has, then it's probably because you employed at the time one of those invaluable assistants who are trained and destined for the better things to which they so quickly move on. VOICEGRAM will make that 'telephone hour' a reality.

How often have you, as a spouse, tried desperately to follow the morning's parting instructions to communicate your plans for the afternoon or evening, and failed in every attempt to hit one of the moments when the object of your affection (and increasing annoyance) is not on the line talking with someone else? VOICEGRAM will take your message, and deliver it (no questions asked, no time-consuming but unavoidable chitchat, no second thoughts, no added assignments) the first time it's possible to do so between those outgoing calls, thus sparing you the next meeting's cold and baleful, "Why didn't you call?"

How often have you as a parent, a friend, an interested fellow-being, an indignant consumer, wanted to say your say without being interrupted—and thus derailed from the straight talk you intended—by the casual conversational gambits of affection, friendship, courtesy, or mere public relations blather. VOICEGRAM will let you do that too—and even offer you a replay for your cooler consideration before you definitely authorize delivery. You may indeed find that you want your call delivered and received full-force, but VOICEGRAM will allow you to preface it with another message—scheduled for prior delivery—that won't rescind what you've said, but reassuringly introduce the stern words that careful afterthought has persuaded you ought to be delivered and heard exactly as you spoke them.

And, finally, have you ever, in one of those sorrowful times that engulf us all sooner or later, had to make a dozen or so calls one after another, all with the same hurtful information and all demanding the sensitivity and control that you know each repetition will inevitably wear away? VOICEGRAM will make every such call what you may successfully make of the first, and, in addition, spare those whom you must call the formalistic courtesies that acknowledgment of such messages usually requires.

The receiver of your call may have options too. If the person you've called doesn't

want to receive the message exactly when you've specified that it be delivered, he can order it held. Then he can call it up from the computer's store after he has made whatever adjustments are necessary in his mental state, companionship, or physical surroundings to give your message the attention it deserves.

That is VOICEGRAM, a system we need, one we are simulating in bits and pieces, and one Ma Bell is in no hurry to give us. Like the 'French' telephone.

Readers who are not citizens or residents of the United States may require an explanation of the name *Ma Bell*. It is a sobriquet, long current in the United States financial community and now outside it, for the American Telephone and Telegraph Company (AT&T). The nickname reflects stockbrokers' and investors' confidence that AT&T is as substantial, enduring, and all-embracing as motherhood. Through various subsidiaries AT&T manufactures, owns, supplies, and operates most telephone service and equipment in the United States. The parent company seems to avoid the use of its name, however, and prefers *Bell Telephone System*, or, simply, *The Telephone Company*.

Undoubtedly citizens and residents of the United States do enjoy, as Ma Bell claims, 'the best telephone service in the world.' Whether that requires or justifies Ma Bell's profitable regulated monopoly, is a complicated question, beyond discussion here. The monopoly is not as solid as it once was. The courts have deprived Ma Bell of the right to require only her own equipment at the ends of her lines, and there is pressure on her to separate the long-line service from local service.

But it has become something of a national indoor sport to take pot-shots at Ma Bell, her special status, and her advertisements. Ma Bell is extremely sensitive about that word *monopoly*. The word *monopoly* in any complaint elicits massive explanation of her adherence to every regulation of appropriate public utilities commissions, and of the separateness of her 'related' subsidiaries. Her advertisements are not truly advertisement. Advertising is the child of competition, and, for all practical purposes, Ma Bell has none. So she *publicizes*

instead the satisfaction of all her customers with the service she provides. Like so much corporate advertising—especially since it has taken up the energy crisis as subject matter—the telephone company's advertising is often overly sentimental, insipid, and unbearably condescending. I often wish Ma Bell's advertising agency could be taken over by Putney Swope.³ He would know how to tell the telephone story as it really is. He'd make that 'French' telephone at least as French as French dry-cleaning and French ice cream.

But it's not my purpose to harass the distinguished old lady. For I'm sure many of her executives and employees are as aware of two important points as most readers and I must be. First, any monopolistic enterprise, public or private, non-profit or for-profit, too easily accustoms itself to its freedom from marketplace pressures. It becomes easier, in the cause of 'efficiency,' of 'total service,' of 'integrated systems,' to *think* for consumers, rather than to *listen* to them. Second, as is true of any large corporation, but especially of a monopolistic corporation, it becomes increasingly difficult for many reasons to move quickly when change or innovation is suggested. On the one hand, government and the public may criticize any attempt to enhance or broaden service, while on the other shareholders are just as likely to complain that the suggested change or innovation constitutes an unnecessary risk in the light of current earnings. Ma Bell no doubt deserves much of the criticism and some of the antagonism she has experienced, but one must appreciate that in many situations she's damned if she does and damned if she doesn't.

My complaint here, however, is justified, I believe. Ma Bell has investigated and researched and trial-marketed and marketed innumerable new communications terminals for data transfer. But she has neglected to enhance the use—as a system like VOICEGRAM surely would—of the finest and simplest terminal of them all, the telephone. We must apparently accept the fact that the monopoly that controls telephone service doesn't itself appreciate the potential uses of the telephone as a communications tool for the majority of its users.

1. Krans C R. "Proposal for a new nationwide communications public utility service." Paper presented at the International Communications Conference of the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers (IEEE), 21 June 1972, Philadelphia, Pa.

2. ———. "Meeting the public's communications needs." Paper submitted for presentation at the International Communications Conference of

the IEEE, 11-13 June 1973, Seattle, Washington. — Copies of these and other papers on VOICEGRAM are available from the author, president, Consulting Engineers, Inc., 845 Mount Moro Road, Villanova, Pa. 19085, USA.

3. The fine motion picture *Putney Swope* is recommended to readers who may have missed its revelations of the method and potential of advertising carried to its limit.