

**Raphaël TRICHARD, “Telephony in the Lyonnais countryside: an initial approach [1895-1939]” (“La téléphonie dans les campagnes lyonnaises: première approche (1895-1939)”)**, master’s thesis in contemporary history directed by Jean-Luc Mayaud, Lyon 2, 2001, 180 p.

A study of the arrival and development of the telephone in small French towns and villages is highly contrastive. The departmental network created by the PTT administration together with the advances and good will of the General Council that bestowed the countryside with this new means of sharing information (although that was not its original goal) followed the initial contact with telephony in these small communities through private lines that were only used for business and professional purposes. These lines were definitely useful: Their relative importance (which excluded private use) became apparent with the appearance of the departmental network as an object of commercial and industrial interest. The set up of this network depended on sound financial management that was confronted by advances and reimbursements between the administration and a local body of service providers. It was considerably developed throughout the period: the number of PTT products was constantly growing, whether this took the form of revenue tax, conversations exchanged or other benefits; new circuits were added annually, putting the local network in touch with the rest of the country. However, growth was relative: in 1906, 90% of all communities were connected, and full installation was only supposed to take a year. This did not occur until 1927, and even then, only two-thirds of all communities had their own network. The number of phone subscribers did not take off in rural areas the way it did in urban settings. Moreover, operational problems were plentiful: slow connections, high costs, random taxes, problems providing basic materials, lack of staffing, criticism from users, and fragile technical parts. On the departmental level, the telephone both filled the State’s coffers and sparked mistrust in its providers and users.

Most of the rural population seemed interested in its arrival, although there were of course a few complaints and each village had its objections or demands that were only somewhat addressed by petitions or other operational aids. This situation proves that the countryside was still relatively isolated until the arrival of the telephone: country folk were not put off by it but found it of interest; it was not one of the symbols of progress that villagers rejected. But they were among the first to be affected by the problems that were inherent to the times; sparsely populated villages tried to do their best and relied on their local population. This “system” became institutionalized by the administrative practice of the Post and Telegraph administration. It was an enormous responsibility, hiring and employee compensation were delicate matters, and the service was difficult to use.

The coherence of the network is more difficult to assess and comparisons have not been formed with other departments. It is certain that a telephone network that was devised for telegraphic use cannot be considered a coherent one, insofar as the means were not modified to reach different goals, since the telephone had replaced the telegraph. Be that as it may, the circuits that were built and used from 1900-1920 seem to correspond to

pre-established and developed plans; the second phase, from 1920-1939, seems to have been less well-planned and long term plans were no longer proposed. The lack of determination and forethought about the future led to the development of a haphazard policy for developing new lines that provided significant but realistic service.

All these problems provided a focus for the tensions between the administration and the departmental assembly; these pressures already existed in the first phase of development but had become aggravated by the second phase of the program. The unavoidable rupture occurred around 1932 when the General Council abolished all of its reimbursable advances because of the new financial law. The cohabitation of the two participants who did not share quite the same goals gave hope for a compromise that became the basis for understating the departmental network.

The study of telephony in rural areas, or more specifically in the rural areas of the Rhone valley, allows us to present two elements of fundamental importance. Villagers' traditional habits were both modified and perpetuated. They were transformed because new sounds were heard and a new degree of discretion appeared on the scene; customs were also perpetuated in the sense that old habits were applied to the newly adopted telephone equipment: the public phone booth was taken into consideration and gradually became a new way of connecting people via communication; indiscretions also continued to adapt themselves to the new mode of communication. Thus traditional forms of communication were perpetuated even as they evolved. Furthermore, a certain kind of village life is reflected in the development of the telephone: it extended itself into the community through different sectors of activity, most often professional, by geographic area, and by network or interpersonal relations. In this sense, the new means of sharing information revealed the various connections that can exist between a small number of individuals, between neighborhoods, and between professionals. In turn, these connections can expose an overview of economic, cultural, or social activity that might not otherwise be perceived. The prism of telephony, which is also applied to the analysis of the urban environment, is of great interest but ultimately must be acknowledged as an imperfect mirror than deforms the object it reflects, all the more so since the communities we examine are small: the contrasts it reveals appear to be important and remain to be critically measured.

