

# Business Before Pleasure on the Wire

## Effect of 'Phone Philandering on the Call Frequency Curve of the City and Some Suggested Mitigations



"Guess who this is!"

By JOHN WALKER HARRINGTON.

MISS MILICENT MALINGER, who is a stenographer in an office in one of the skyscrapers of this our city, is a well-known 'phone prodigal. It takes her just about one hour to get ready for action as a wire wastrel, the busy hour when all the resources of the centrals are staggering under the load of traffic. She has been working ever so hard. Why, she has to wash her hands, you see, and repair the powder losses on the tip of her retroussé nose, and get the novels piled in snugly against the typewriter, and do ever so many things! Her employer is still reading the mail and there is plenty of time. Service is as free as the spring water, why not call up Mabel? She does.

"Guess who this is!"  
 "Ah, you don't know."  
 "Oh, you poor fish!"  
 "Whenjaget in las' nigh'?"  
 "Wha' he say?"

"Well, Ah wouldn't do a thing to come between you an' him, honest; cross ma heart."

"Keep off. You're on a busy wiah!"  
 "Some parties is suttenly pretty thick."

"Thas you, ole dear. Somebody was butting in. Like the nerve of some people!"

"Wher ya goin' t'lunch?"

"Don't like that—les meet Polly Anns—"

"Oh, say, ya don' meanit!"

"Why didn't ya tel somun? Engaged—holding' it out on me, your bes' fren' Say, Mabe—you are the limit. Jes' a minute—somebody—quit your ringing. Well, good-bye, Mabe—see you t'lunch."

Now, Miss Milicent Malinger is only one of a large class who use up telephone service in large quantities for no apparent good, in these days when the demands for wires for the ordinary transaction of the business of a great city exceeds the supply. Her employer is amiable and it really doesn't make so much difference in the case of Milicent, perhaps, but there are so many of her, and also so many male philanderers of the phone, that there is no limit to strain and the stress of untimely discourse which clogs the system. How many men and women eager to attend to the affairs of the day there are, who would be happier, if somebody would please marry Milicent and take her out of the treadmill. But if somebody does marry Milicent observe what will happen. She will move into a flat up in Harlem and about 9 or 10 o'clock every morning she will be calling up Florence or Mabe just the same and blocking the service about inconsequential matters.

Telephone service may be considered as a pack mule, going up a mountain with a load on its back. As he goes higher we increase his burden and at the peak of a business day, which occurs at that busy hour of the exchange between 11 and 12 o'clock, the creature is panting and bleary-eyed, but still working along as best he may.

When epidemics or the demands of war required that the operators should ask "Is this call necessary?" there was some check on the wastrels of the wire, but even then not so very much. The tele-

phone in pre-war days had become such a part of everyday life, as handy as the ear of an ever present friend, that it never occurred to anybody to limit himself or herself in the use of it, or to employ it in less busy hours.

What an index of the city is the rise and fall of the figure which records the frequency the telephone calls of a single business day! The daily average of calls in New York City is now over three million, which means that the 850,000 stations or instruments go into use at least four times each every twenty-four hours, and some of them keep steadily at it all through a working day. The strain at times is tremendous, and we hear many complaints of the inadequacy of the service, the slowness of operators in responding, and the tardiness of making connections.

As a matter of engineering record it now takes about ten seconds on the average to get the echo of "Number, please," and from twenty-five to thirty seconds on the average to get a connection. The operators are far less numerous than they should be; it takes a year to train one so that she will have "poise on the board," or, in other words, so that she will not lose her head in emergencies, and equipment lacking on account of the war embargoes is just being got in. In the halcyon days Central used to answer on an average in three seconds, but then the burden on the switchboards was not so heavy.

To show the situation with regard to wire wastrels and phone philanderers and



Central Used to Answer in  
 Three Seconds.

the complications they create for business folks who think that a telephone is not a social adjunct, a chart has been prepared, based on the reports of telephone engineers.

When New York begins to stir slightly at 6 o'clock in the morning only a few operators are on duty and the demands on the wire are scant—less than 20,000 calls an hour. Business awakes at about 8 o'clock and the markets and the factories begin to get busy.

"I'll call you in the morning," Milicent Malinger remarked to Florence Flutter the last thing when they parted at the subway which conveyed Florence to Carnarsie. And so she did. Also she called Mabel and others, arriving at the office a little before 9 o'clock in order

to be sure of getting uninterrupted wire service before the manager arrived. The office boy is also quite busily engaged at the same time, and Miss Cams, who is at the office private exchange, has a few thoughts of her own to contribute to the trembling strands.

Much of the staggering load which is reached at the hour of 10 o'clock and continues until almost noon is due to the prodigals and philanderers of the phone. In a busy day the peak may easily reach 425,000 calls an hour—which is more than any system of wires and women folk can stand without some signs of flurry.

The curve sags between 12 and 2, rises slightly at 3 and begins to drop at 4 o'clock. It recovers itself somewhat on its downward sweep between the hours of 6 and 7. The fathers of families are at that time sending word that it would rush and worry them to death to come home to dinner on account of the great pressure of affairs at the office. Engagements for dinner are coursing over



The Operators Are Far Less Numerous  
 Than They Should Be.

the wire, and there are (in ordinary times) hurried calls upon the box offices of the theatres or upon the wires of favorite speculators in theatrical pasteboard.

Then again the downward trend until at midnight there are only a few tinkles of the bells.

It is no easy task to reconstruct the manners of people, and already established telephone customs are hard to mend. There is a disposition to treat as the height of impertinence any interference with one's using the telephone just when she or he thinks of it and regardless of who is paying for the service. Many a time Miss Malinger actually goes back to the office to phone from her employer's station, and in some offices the toll of these unnecessary calls is appalling.

However, the road to relief from telephone congestion, while there is so great a struggle to keep pace with the demands of service, lies in the direction of control. If the needless and useless calls of the feckless could be kept down, or deferred, if there are employers too complacent to adopt a rule against the private use of the telephone during business hours, there are still ways in which the common lot can be bettered.

Suppose, for instance, that housewives went out to market. It would be fine exercise for them and would take a strain off the service in the hours in which the load is piling high. Much of the volume of calls at 9 o'clock, when the service swings into 300,000 calls an hour, is due to the orders given to the butcher and the grocer.

Wall Street conducts a business which



"Oh, you poor fish!"

must have the touch and go of communication as instant as it is possible to get it. Watching the flashings of those lights in the Rector Street exchange which show how the service is proceeding, one may note that the answers of the operators often come within two or three seconds. But it may be that the tired business man himself does a little more than his share of telephone wasting. Of course, social matters, have their place in oiling the machinery of business, but Mr. Housanlot, who lives in the suburbs, does talk a lot at times about golf and poker and fishing.

In the curve devoted to telephone reform, the idea has been to indicate how a more uniform service may be maintained. Suppose that just a little more service is employed before the hour of 9, and then at 10 the calls are kept down to 340,000 an hour and are kept running along at that rate until 4. It would be rather hard on the telephone operators, perhaps, to abridge their luncheons or to take luncheons in shifts, as they do, but if the frequency of calls was not permitted to rise so high and was kept on an even line for the afternoon, many of the unnecessary, that is, the social and persiflage calls, would be postponed until the less busy period of the afternoon.

A system such as this would insure a well-rounded telephone curve, which would make a great many operators more comfortable and would ease the strain on the system in many directions. It is often necessary or desirable, of course, to telephone about dinner and the theatre, but a little forethought would save half such messages. Also, if you have not seen Reginald since last night and can't possibly see him again till 8 o'clock this evening, it is hard not to be allowed to bridge the gap with a little harmless exchange of dove notes over the phone. But with a little self-discipline that also can be managed. One way, of course—a simple one—is to make tomorrow's engagement the night before.

There is one practice which might be advantageously encouraged. If clerks and stenographers would do their private telephoning at the luncheon hour that would greatly facilitate business. By the same token could not the boss have a telephone at his table in the club?

The telephone exchange is a facility which should respond to the slightest variations of service. Its barometer reflects instantly the state of business and of social life. If a thunderstorm comes, the tide of traffic on the wire rises like a flood. There are so many persons to be told on the instant that somebody else, cannot get home as promptly as usual and desires to be met at the subway by a stout youth carrying umbrellas.

A tieup of the street railways or the subways, a strike on the public utilities; the holding of a great celebration in a city, all these are factors which are instantly recorded at the switchboards. The presence of many thousands of persons this Summer in the hotels and boarding houses, who had come to greet returning troops, sent the daily peak of calls to mountainous heights.

The influenza epidemic of last Autumn

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raised the daily average from 3,100,000 calls in September to a high peak of 3,200,000 a day in October, and this when the telephone company was expostulating in the news columns of the papers, in paid advertisements and in many other ways against the unnecessary calls.

Just how events of all kinds affect the telephone communications of a city may be shown from the record of a downtown exchange in which the curve of the calls is very marked. Here are some examples:

Average traffic in May, 1915.....	71,526
Traffic on May 7, 1915, Sinking of Lusitania .....	92,055
Average traffic in October, 1918....	99,921
Traffic on October 5, 1918—Morgan Explosion .....	116,180
Average traffic in November, 1918..	91,804
Traffic Nov. 1, 1918, B. R. T. wreck .....	101,775

Traffic on the telephone is normally at its height in Winter and in Fall, but this rule did not hold good for this year, as the Summer was one of the busiest which the exchanges had to face. When the demobilization of the troops has been finished, the usual demands for increased traffic which come with the cold weather will be made upon the system.

When relief will come from the present congestion and one may talk to his

or her heart's content without the slightest misgiving that unnecessary language is interfering with the use of the telephone for something useful, is indeed hard to say. The telephone school for operators down in Houston street has tripled its capacity, and raw materials for the building of switchboards also are being received in large quantities now that the war ban has been lifted.

New telephone exchanges are nearing completion and many new switchboards, the installation of one of which is nearly a year's job in itself, are being built. By the first of the year probably something like the pre-war time efficiency of the telephone will have been reached, but all that is on the knees of the gods. Many of the skilled mechanics have returned from France, where they were in the Signal Corps, and the company is getting back many of its skilled head operators who were behind the lines, but these readjustments proceed gradually.

Meanwhile something might be done in the direction of restricting the activities of those persons who disturb the tide of business by private telephone conversations whose content is nil and which impose a burden upon the system of communication that to many of us has become an actual business necessity.