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JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies, Volume 60, Issue 5, 2021,
pp. 150-173 (Article)

Published by Michigan Publishing

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2021.0059>

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the history of AT&T's 1964 Picturephone. Analyzing advertisements, corporate documents, and news reports, it explores how the discourses that surrounded the Picturephone united fantasies of telephony and televisuality to imagine the device at the center of America's domestic future. AT&T described the Picturephone as enhancing familial intimacy and domestic efficiency, while journalists often saw its presence in the home as a threat, capable of shattering illusions of domestic perfection. This article contends that the discourses that surrounded the Picturephone ultimately represented an acknowledgment that domestic idealism was merely an illusion exposed by the Picturephone's gaze.

On April 20, 1964, New York World's Fair consultant William Laurence, a former *New York Times* science editor, sat in a booth, staring at a small oval-shaped device sporting a five-inch rectangular screen and an attached keypad. With photographers at the ready, Laurence took the keypad and dialed a number. The screen flickered on, and Donald Shaffer, managing editor of the *Anaheim Bulletin*, appeared at its center, his movements visible and voice audible. Nearly 3,000 miles away, in Disneyland, California, a group of journalists gathered in a theater at the park's Bell Systems exhibit. Shaffer, stage left, stared at an identical oval-shaped apparatus. Another apparatus was

Hannah Spaulding, "Reach Out and Watch Someone: Televisuality, Gender, and the Short Life of the Picturephone," *JCMS* 60, no. 5 (2020–2021): 150–173.

positioned center stage, mounted on a platform in full view of the audience. As Laurence's call rang through the theater, Shaffer pressed a button on his device. As his screen activated, so did the one in the middle of the stage, simultaneously transmitting Laurence's image and voice to an audience ten states away.¹

With this event, AT&T introduced the American public to the Picturephone: an audiovisual telephone developed at Bell Laboratories and heralded as the future of communication.² The Picturephone enabled two-way transmission of sound and image through AT&T cables. Using the device, individuals could send both their voice and their image across vast distances to engage in virtual, face-to-face conversations in real time. Combining principles of telephonic and televisual communication, the Picturephone unified TV's capacity for live audiovisual transmission with the telephone's power for point-to-point interactivity. In so doing, it offered new forms of communication, contact, and exposure that promised to impact American social and cultural life.

Despite its potential, the Picturephone's place in the public eye was short lived. Less than a decade after its initial release, the press declared it a commercial failure, relegated to the status of quirky prehistory (something too ahead of its time) or dismissed as engineering hubris. Yet the Picturephone remained emblematic of futuristic visions of communication. The dream of videotelephony did not disappear when the Picturephone ceased to be commercially available; for years after its supposed failure, various forms of audiovisual telephones (including AT&T's VideoPhone) were released. For decades, these new video calling systems experienced similar fates as the Picturephone—losing money and inspiring debate—until videotelephony finally emerged successful in the 2000s. Reinvented as software and supported by broadband internet infrastructure, applications such as Skype and FaceTime seemed to announce with their launch that AT&T's vision of the future had arrived—even if the actual impact often seems less dramatic and revolutionary than previously declared.

Given the prominence of videotelephony in contemporary culture, the audiovisual telephones of the past demand increased attention. The Picturephone is not merely a technological oddity or failed first attempt but rather an important site of media history. Its invention, popular discussion, and uneven decline are all worthy of interrogation. In examining this history, I focus on the ways in which the Picturephone was understood, publicized, and imagined. In particular, I explore how discourses that surrounded the device's short history positioned it within the fraught gendered and racial-

1 This account was taken from newspaper articles, AT&T press releases, and archival photographs of the event. AT&T Photo Service, *Untitled*, 1964, photograph, box 49, folder 1, "Telephones—Picturephone—Early Demonstrations (Bell System Exhibit at Disneyland), 1964," Collection No. 6: Bell System, AT&T Archives and History Center, San Antonio, Texas (hereafter AHC); Pacific Northwest Bell, "First Transcontinental Picturephone Call Made," press release, April 29, 1964, box 127, folder 1, "Telephones, Picturephone, 1956–1981," Collection No. 2: SBC Communications Inc., AHC; and Arthur Riley, "Picturephone Calls for Best Face Forward," *Boston Globe*, July 26, 1964, A8.

2 Bell Laboratories was the research and development wing of AT&T, and thus, when I say, "Bell Laboratories," I am also referring to AT&T.

ized terrain of American domesticity. I discuss how AT&T promotions and popular press responses to the Picturephone often articulated hopes, fears, and applications that reconfigured ideas about television and telephony that have long defined the American mediated home. Although AT&T imagined business communication as the Picturephone's primary function, I analyze how the debates, imagery, and events that surrounded its release repeatedly inserted audiovisual telephony into the spaces and fantasies of postwar family life. In doing so, my article follows the precedent set by Kenneth Lipartito's "Picturephone and the Information Age: The Social Meaning of Failure," which argues for a reassessment of the Picturephone in terms of the logics that encouraged its invention rather than the conditions of its failure.³ Yet rather than focusing on the Picturephone's contribution to histories of data transmission, I turn instead to its emergence, publicity, and decline. Teasing out the device's connections with domesticity, telephony, and televisuality, I explore the debates and imagery—many of which were embedded in gendered ideologies and conservative cultural logics—that shaped understandings of the Picturephone throughout its protracted life.

My analysis of the Picturephone's social and cultural meaning brings together advertising, industrial, and journalistic discourse. I examine Bell Laboratories' and AT&T's corporate publications, press releases, and internal documents, as well as photographs, exhibition reports, advertisements, and press clippings stored at the AT&T Archives and History Center. I also examine newspaper and magazine articles that offer general commentaries on the Picturephone, which were written not to sell the device but to report upon its release. Drawing on media historical methodologies, I examine how these different materials form an "intertextual context" within which people worked to make sense of the Picturephone and its potential effects on their daily lives.⁴ Although this approach cannot account for the full range of meanings individuals applied to the Picturephone, it can help construct a sense of the discursive terrain in which it was interpreted.

In mapping this industrial and technological history, I pay close attention to the social, political, and cultural stakes of these developments. When the Picturephone was first introduced to the American market, it was accompanied by flurries of promotional and journalistic activity. It was the centerpiece of exhibitions and the subject of press releases, advertising campaigns, and news reports. Through this proliferation of discursive production, the Picturephone—its uses, abilities, and potential impacts—became a site of cultural speculation and popular fantasy. It emerged as a device capable of transforming American culture, providing modes of connection and contact that elicited just as much fear as they did hope. Alongside the Picturephone's capacity to simulate face-to-face interaction, it also threatened to invade the routines, sacred spaces, and private rituals of everyday life, revealing domestic secrets that might be better left unseen. Indeed, its powers of intrusion

3 Kenneth Lipartito, "Picturephone and the Information Age: The Social Meaning of Failure," *Technology and Culture* 44, no. 1 (2003): 50–81, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tech.2003.0033>.

4 Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 2.

and exposure, already present in the discourse surrounding broadcast TV and the telephone, emerged in new configurations. With its capacity for two-way communication, the Picturephone threatened to destroy boundaries and fantasies of domestic life that had to be carefully constructed and contained.

THE TELEPHONE OF TOMORROW AND THE DESIRES OF YESTERDAY

For Bell Laboratories, the Picturephone represented both a revolutionary electronic tool, ready to usher in an era of enhanced, multimedia interaction, and the arrival of a communications system that had been anticipated since the nineteenth century. Indeed, as William Uricchio demonstrates, such a device had been the subject of science fiction stories, cartoons, and speculative patents since the telephone's invention.⁵ Before an audiovisual telephone was technologically feasible, fantasies of transmitting sound *and* image along telephone lines captured the public imagination. Even more crucially, this desire for two-way audiovisual transmission was integral to the invention of television and, particularly, the television experiments at Bell Laboratories. During the 1920s and 1930s, researchers strove to develop working television systems.⁶ While companies such as the RCA Corporation focused their attention on one-way electronic television, Bell Laboratories' experiments created devices that would allow for two-way, point-to-point transmission using telephone cables. Mara Mills contends that Bell Laboratories saw this process as a means of enhancing audio telephone service.⁷ Initial demonstrations of these experimental TV systems showed off a mixture of two-way and one-way communication with presentations of both live performance and audiovisual conversation. However, when Bell Laboratories released the Ikonophone, a two-way television, in 1930, they largely abandoned the transmission of popular entertainment. Instead, they designed their TV system predominantly as an audiovisual telephone. Though operational, installed in AT&T offices, and shown at public demonstrations, the Ikonophone was never commercially available, in part because the company did not see an obvious market for their new device.⁸ Moreover, the eventual success of the RCA Corporation's electronic broadcast model (helped along by the regulatory decisions of the Federal Communications Commission) served to define commercial TV as a one-way communication medium.⁹ This reinforced two-way television's distinction from entertainment TV and status as an enhancement of telephone services rather than an alternate mode of television communication.

5 William Uricchio, "Television, Film and the Struggle for Media Identity," *Film History* 10, no. 2 (June 1998): 118–127; and William Uricchio, "Television's First Seventy-Five Years: The Interpretive Flexibility of a Medium in Transition," in *The Oxford Handbook of Film and Media Studies*, ed. Robert Kolker (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 286–305.

6 For more on Bell Laboratories' early two-way television experiments, see Mara Mills, "The Audiovisual Telephone: A Brief History," in *Handheld? Music Video Aesthetics for Portable Devices*, ed. Henry Keazor, Hans W. Giessen, and Wübbena Thorsten (Heidelberg, Germany: ART-Dok, 2012), 34–47; and Luke Stadel, "Television as a Sound Medium, 1922–1994" (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2015), 75–80.

7 Mills, "Audiovisual Telephone," 37–40.

8 Stadel, "Television," 78–79.

9 Brian Winston, *Media Technology and Society: A History: From the Telegraph to the Internet* (London: Routledge, 1998), 111–119.

Yet Bell Laboratories' explicitly telephonic idea of two-way television persisted. Experimentation continued after World War II, and eventually, in April 1964, the Picturephone debuted at the New York World's Fair. With this release, AT&T seemed poised to deliver on its long-anticipated promise of two-way audiovisual transmission—one that was linked to the telephone and television both technologically and discursively. The Picturephone's small oval-shaped console initially consisted of a cathode-ray tube, five-inch screen, camera, and speaker.¹⁰ Like the Ikonophone, Bell Laboratories' newest attempt at video calling transmitted audiovisual signals not over broadcast channels but through wired circuits, which relied on AT&T's preexisting infrastructure. However, unlike the traditional telephone, for which a single circuit was sufficient for audio-only transmission, the Picturephone's visual dimension required a second circuit to transmit its high-density signals. Thus, installing the Picturephone was not merely a question of buying the device; one also needed to pay for additional telephone lines, a cost totaling approximately \$1,200 annually. Consequently, the device was inaccessible even for wealthy private consumers.¹¹

AT&T did not initially expect individuals to buy a Picturephone for their homes. Instead, Picturephones were installed in public places and corporate offices, where private citizens and businesses could test the new device. Individuals could arrange appointments at public Picturephone booths to call family members, friends, or business associates. Companies could pay to have Picturephones set up in their offices and try out audiovisual telephony's capacities for long-distance meetings, sales demonstrations, and data transmission.¹² Through these tactics, AT&T hoped to encourage the adoption of videotelephony, as well as a broader shift toward multimedia and data communication.¹³

Despite the Picturephone's limited consumer availability, waves of promotional rhetoric and critical commentary accompanied the first call. News reports and industry discussions offered speculations and predictions about the new device, its cultural impact, and natural place within the history of communications. According to an AT&T advertising flyer, "Ever since the first telephones were put into service almost a century ago, people have wondered if the day would come when they could see—and be *seen*—by telephone."¹⁴ In this pamphlet, the Picturephone represented a long-anticipated extension of telephony, something the public had expected since the nineteenth century. This promotional rhetoric depicted the Picturephone itself as new, revolutionary, and futuristic, and the desires it fulfilled as an age-old,

10 A later iteration swapped the rounded console for a rectangular one with a larger screen and more advanced camera (see Figure 1).

11 Lipartito notes that even the cheapest monthly rates translate today to approximately \$300 a month in "Picturephone," 58.

12 Data transmission was central to the Picturephone's corporate utility after the release of the Picturephone II, because its larger screen and more advanced camera better enabled the display of graphic and numerical information. See "Giving Computers the Picture," *Business Week*, July 13, 1968; and AT&T Public Relations Department, press release, December 14, 1967, box 127, folder 1, "Telephones, Picturephone, 1956–1981," Collection No. 2: SBC Communications Inc., AHC.

13 Lipartito, "Picturephone," 63–71.

14 Bell Laboratories, "Seeing by Telephone . . . The Picturephone Story" (Bell Laboratories, 1964).

Figure 1. Picturephone with period image (photographed by the author at AT&T Archives and History Center, San Antonio, Texas).

profound human drive toward “better, warmer, and more nearly complete” mediated communication.¹⁵

At the World’s Fair, the Picturephone was shown as part of Bell Laboratories’ “Communications—Key to Universal Understanding” exhibit. The display, which consisted of a ride that took visitors through the history

15 Bell Laboratories, “Seeing by Telephone.”

of communication and an array of different demonstrations, displays, and games, placed the Picturephone explicitly as an exciting step in the trajectory of mediated human interaction.¹⁶ Displayed next to information on the life of inventor Alexander Graham Bell, touchtone telephones, undersea cables, and Telstar (Bell Laboratories' communications satellite), the Picturephone was explicitly integrated into AT&T's corporate legacy and communications system. It was positioned as a key feature within a communications revolution that would transform the world and bring a "bright tomorrow for all."¹⁷

Moreover, in an event marking the installation of Picturephone booths outside the World's Fairgrounds in New York, Chicago, and Washington, DC, AT&T orchestrated a widely publicized call between Edwin Grosvenor, great-grandson of Bell, and Charles Winternitz, great-grandson of Bell's assistant, Thomas Watson.¹⁸ By connecting these two boys via Picturephone, AT&T recalled the very first telephone call between their great-grandfathers nearly a hundred years before. This publicity stunt constructed the Picturephone as the telephone's natural successor, a communication tool tied biologically to its history and capable of being just as revolutionary. Together, these various promotional tactics inscribed the Picturephone within Bell's legacy, constructing it not as a gimmick or novelty but as an important communicative tool emerging from AT&T's commitment to technological progress.

In placing the Picturephone within the history of human communication, AT&T stressed its capacity to overcome the inadequacies of other forms of mediated interaction. In their written materials, Bell Laboratories emphasized this narrative by regularly opening their profiles with poetic musings about the Picturephone's connections to an intrinsic need for face-to-face contact. For instance, an article discussing the inauguration of Picturephone service in Pittsburgh begins by tying the device to ancient communicative desires. With an Orientalist inflection, the article claims:

"Let us move closer to the fire," the ancient Chinese were fond of remarking, "and see what we are saying." They understood the value of seeing the person one talks to, the feeling of increased intimacy that proximity brings, the extra dimension that facial expressions add to conversation. But since the dawn of man this kind of communication has been restricted to face-to-face encounters between people no farther than ten to twelve feet apart. Greater distances blurred the image and—until the invention of the telephone—restricted the voice.¹⁹

16 AT&T, "Detailed Description of the Bell System Exhibition, Bell System Exhibit New York World's Fair," press information kit, 1965, box 19, folder "Bell System Exhibit: New York World's Fair 1964–1965," Collection No. 6: AT&T Corp., AHC.

17 AT&T, "Detailed Description."

18 Pacific Northwest Bell, "Picturephone Service Inaugurated in Three Cities," news bulletin, June 25, 1965, box 127, folder 1, "Telephones, Picturephone, 1956–1981," Collection No. 2: SBC Communications Inc., AHC.

19 "Picturephone Service: Adding Sight to Sound," proof, June 1970, box 127, folder 2, "Picturephone, 1969–1982," Collection No. 2: SBC Communications Inc., AHC.

This article presents the drive for audiovisual communication as an eternal and fundamental dimension of human interaction. It frames the Picturephone, with its capacity to extend “man’s . . . eye” alongside his voice, as capable of bringing the intimacy of face-to-face interaction into the realm of mediated communication.²⁰

In a 1969 issue of *The Record*, one of Bell Laboratories’ in-house magazines, company vice president Julius P. Molnar explicitly makes the case for the Picturephone’s capacity to simulate in-person interaction. For Molnar, although “real person-to-person conversation is still man’s most complete and satisfying way of communicating,” the Picturephone came closest to solving the shortcomings inherent in mediated interaction.²¹ According to Molnar, unlike the letter writer or even the telephone caller, the Picturephone user “senses in his conversation an enhanced feeling of proximity and intimacy with the other party.” Picturephone enthusiasts argued that by uniting sound and image, the device’s advanced mechanisms could replicate the pleasures and power of face-to-face conversation. It could produce forms of intimacy and connection impossible with any other communication medium. By highlighting the Picturephone’s capacity to authentically simulate live conversation, Bell Laboratories’ promotional materials marketed the medium as a mode of virtual travel, capable of conquering spatial distance and eliminating the need for physical transportation. According to Molnar, “Just as the telegraph overcame the distance barrier for written words, and the telephone for spoken words, so Picturephone service will bring people face-to-face across our continent and eventually over oceans.”²²

This rhetoric, while directly referencing the communicative powers of telegraphy and telephony, also evokes the specter of television—particularly that of closed-circuit and industrial TV. As Kit Hughes argues in her study of television in the workplace, when television technology was deployed in the service of science and industry, it was praised for its capacity to extend and transform human sight, transporting audiences in real time to places and perspectives inaccessible to the human eye.²³ Through closed-circuit networks of cameras and monitors, viewers were given live, remote access to the insides of engines and microscopic organisms and bird’s-eye views of factory floors, enabling scientific knowledge and managerial efficiency. Thus, the rhetoric surrounding the Picturephone mobilized these televisual discourses along with telephonic ones. More than simply a window on the world, the Picturephone became a door, or even a vehicle, virtually bringing people together and bridging distant spaces.

This fantasy does, however, carry a fraught articulation of urban and suburban life. In his promotion of the Picturephone, Molnar argued that the device could operate as a means of travel. He claimed that this would inevitably lead to its use as a replacement for many face-to-face meetings.

20 “Picturephone Service,” 1.

21 Julius P. Molnar, “Picturephone Service—A New Way of Communicating,” *The Record*, 1969, 135.

22 Molnar, 135.

23 Kit Hughes, *Television at Work: Industrial Media and American Labor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 62–92.

While not seeing it as a substitute for *all* in-person conversations, he claimed that with the Picturephone, “the need for many ordinary trips for shopping, for conducting normal business, and for some social purposes should be greatly reduced.”²⁴ According to Molnar, the advantages of virtual travel went beyond individual convenience: by reducing the frequency of commutes, the Picturephone offered broad social benefits, including an end to traffic congestion and densely populated urban centers.²⁵ More than simply representing another tool of communication, Molnar speculated, “It may in fact solve many social problems, particularly those pertaining to life in the big city.”²⁶

Such goals carry with them assumptions about who would benefit from the Picturephone and the form of urban arrangement best suited to US development. Given the types of activities the Picturephone could supplant—most notably, in-person meetings—and the operating cost, the individual envisioned to make the most extensive use of the device was not a working-class laborer but a businessman or manager.²⁷ Moreover, constant references to the “social problems” of “dense populations centers,” “traffic jams,” and “life in the big city” in promotional materials suggest a domestic ideal rooted in low-density spaces and the ability to stay at home.²⁸ Due to the history of redlining and white flight, such a position cannot be disentangled from the politics of class and race.²⁹

24 Molnar, “Picturephone Service,” 135.

25 Today, in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, Molnar’s predictions seem to have finally come to fruition, although with a distinctly dystopian bent. Zoom and other video communication applications have been central to everyday life during this period of global crisis and home confinement. For many people, work, education, and socialization have moved online. Our labor, teaching, learning, and personal connections are performed through video calling software. Office spaces are now empty, city streets sparsely populated, and commuter routes less congested as many individuals find themselves increasingly confined to their domestic spaces. These transformations will likely ease, although some may endure even after the pandemic, seemingly proving Molnar right nearly sixty years after his initial prediction. Yet it was not technology that prompted this transformation. As central as Zoom and other video calling applications have been, it was a pandemic—an external crisis supported by policy and emergency laws—that prompted the changes predicted by Molnar. The technology alone was not enough to produce this social change; it merely facilitated it. What endures after public health no longer demands these transformations will likely be determined by structures of capital rather than technological affordances.

26 Molnar, “Picturephone Service,” 135.

27 The pandemic shares this classed dynamic. Although the majority of business, government, administrative, and postsecondary labor has been performed remotely, many other, often lower paying jobs do not have this luxury. As such, certain workers, deemed “essential,” are required to put their health at risk to continue to labor in person, while others find themselves laid off from their jobs and confronting financial insecurity.

28 Molnar, “Picturephone Service,” 135; Molnar echoes thinkers like Lewis Mumford who advocated for dispersed, low-density neighborhoods modeled after the Garden City. Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970).

29 The history of the American suburbs is bound up with that of white supremacy. In the postwar era, as governments supported suburban migration, banks denied mortgage loans to residents in majority Black neighborhoods. If Black families did manage to settle in the suburbs, they were repeatedly greeted with violence and systematic displays of racism. Thus, in postwar America, the suburbs became a de facto white space, instituting an unofficial policy of segregation that must be considered when examining all rhetorics of space and place. For more see David M. P. Freund, *Colored Property: State Policy and White Racial Politics in Suburban America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); and Douglas S. Massey and

Molnar's promotion of the Picturephone does not merely represent a benign convenience but instead envisions this technology in a way that is complicit in economic and racial segregation. The modes of labor it supplants, the kinds of travel it eliminates, and the urban spaces it promises to rearrange inscribe the Picturephone within a distinct spatial politics. By enabling virtual travel, the Picturephone promises to further sequester the American middle- and upper-classes into their homes. It gives them distance from people and places that may violate the visions of order and comfort that mark their idealized conceptions of domestic living. Though Molnar posits the Picturephone as a technological solution for everyone, he actually describes a remedy for a class of wealthy suburban managers and a fantasy for a new urban arrangement that inscribes the city as a site of social problems.

THE PICTUREPHONE AT HOME

In stressing the Picturephone's communicative potential, AT&T's public demonstrations also emphasized its connection to home and family. At first glance, this choice seems surprising. The Picturephone was predominately a business technology—a tool praised for improving corporate efficiency and managerial communications. Indeed, many of Bell Laboratories' corporate documents were geared at its business applications.³⁰ Despite this, Bell Laboratories still worked to rhetorically enhance the Picturephone's links with domesticity, intimacy, and interpersonal connection, especially in their public-facing events and images. The device was promoted as the future of communication at events explicitly geared to the public. Although AT&T only planned to install Picturephones in businesses and institutions initially, it is unlikely that they envisioned the technology always having this limited scope. The device's broad cultural significance hinged, at least in part, on people imagining the Picturephone as a tool that would transform everyday life. Through these promotional strategies, the public could envision the device in their living rooms, providing them with intimate and interpersonal audiovisual contact.

AT&T did not stage the first transcontinental video call from government buildings or office towers but instead demonstrated the Picturephone at fairs and amusement parks, which were already associated with wholesome ideals of family-friendly entertainment. Fairgoers could test out the device themselves, using Picturephone booths installed as part of the company's "see-and-try" exhibits.³¹ These booths were "modern and spacious" and constructed "so family members, friends or business associates can also participate in the call."³² They were rigged with microphones and speakers so that users did not need a telephone handset. This design decision helped construct Picturephone calling as a direct, almost unmediated simulation of

Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

30 "Giving Computers the Picture"; and AT&T Public Relations Department, press release.

31 AT&T, "New 'See and Try' Exhibits Featured at Bell Pavilion, Bell System Exhibit New York World's Fair," press information kit, 1965, box 19, folder "Bell System Exhibit: New York World's Fair 1964–1965," Collection No. 6: AT&T Corp., AHC.

32 Bell Laboratories, "Seeing by Telephone."

face-to-face interaction—even as its location at the World's Fair placed the device in a distinctly mediated, spectacular event.

By removing the handset and allowing voice transmission to fill the Picturephone booth, Picturephone calls could truly be a family affair, an experience designed so multiple people could speak and listen together.³³ In encouraging group conversations, AT&T positioned videotelephony within the communicative patterns and visual repertoire of the “family circle,” framing the device as a virtual family visit enabled by the Picturephone screen.³⁴ Indeed, the Picturephone's intimate and domestic qualities were emphasized in the promotional imagery that surrounded it. While politicians and journalists were regularly photographed trying out the Picturephone at special press events, AT&T also pictured more mundane, familial uses of the technology. The company's archives are full of images of parents, children, and grandparents using the device, greeting faraway loved ones with a smile, a wave, or a hand extended out toward the screen.³⁵ As such, the framing of the Picturephone as a domestic technology capable of producing forms of familial closeness not only remediated the telephone's association with home and family but also mobilized many of the discursive tendencies essential to television marketing in the 1950s.³⁶

Although the Picturephone was largely contained within AT&T's specialized booths and exhibition sites, the device was also photographed in simulated domestic spaces. Even before it was released and its design finalized, mock-ups of the technology regularly pictured it in home-like settings.³⁷ In such images, men and, more frequently, women use various iterations of experimental Picturephones in different parts of the home—the living room, the “family planning area,” and even the bathroom.³⁸ After the Pic-

33 AT&T, “Futuristic Booths, Extensive Phone Network Server Fair Visitors, Bell System Exhibit New York World's Fair,” 1965, box 19, folder “Bell System Exhibit: New York World's Fair 1964–1965,” Collection No. 6: AT&T Corp., AHC.

34 The family circle was a common pictorial technique in the promotion of domestic technologies. It was especially prominent in television advertising in the 1950s, which typically arranged parents and children together in a semi-circle completed by the TV set. Using soft, romantic lighting, these ads evoked an impression of technology and family unified in idealized domestic bliss. As such, television was framed as uniting the household, bringing it new forms of recreation and togetherness. See Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 36–72.

35 For example, see AT&T Photo Service, 65–481, 1964, photograph, and *Picturephone Mod I*, c. 1964, photograph, box 49, folder “Telephones—Picturephone—Model I (Oval)—In Settings, 1964–1965,” Collection No. 6: Bell System, AHC; and AT&T Photo Service, M866, c. 1964, photograph, box 49, folder 2, “Telephones—Picturephone—Early Demonstrations (Bell System Picturephone Centers) 1964–1965,” Collection No. 6: Bell System, AHC.

36 This reference to the practices and experiences of domestic television is interesting given the Picturephone's more obvious connection with closed-circuit and industrial television. Whereas ITV strove to distinguish itself from commercial television, invoking gendered language that framed ITV as the “serious” and “practical . . . little brother” to commercial TV's “glamorous cousin,” the Picturephone, perhaps in an effort to imagine a future in which the device could occupy a nearly universal role in everyday life, regularly evoked television's long-standing associations with domesticity, femininity, and family life. Hughes, *Television at Work*, 91.

37 This tendency also existed outside of AT&T. Speculative videophones were installed in Disneyland's Monsanto House. Monsanto Chemical Company, *Picturephone of the Future*, 1958, photograph, 1958, box 49, folder “Telephones—Picturephone—Experimental—In Settings, 1957–1971,” Collection No. 6: Bell System, AHC.

38 For example, see Southwestern Bell Telephone Co., 59–416, 1959, photograph; and

turephone's launch, AT&T and its subsidiaries continued to photograph the device in domestic settings, even though it was never made available for home use. As with images of experimental Picturephones, later photographs often depicted women surrounded by home furnishings, smiling into their domestic Picturephones, supposedly engaging in conversations from the comfort of their own homes.³⁹ Thus, even as the device remained a business technology in practice, Bell Laboratories' promotional materials repeatedly envisioned it as a domestic apparatus. Placed within the family circle and photographed inside the home, the Picturephone mediated the same intimate spaces and relationships as the TV set and the telephone.

VIDEOTELEPHONY AND THE THREAT OF INTRUSION

Although positive assessments of the Picturephone dominated its promotion, the device was also criticized. Reports circulated about its capacity to invade privacy, disrupt the home, and expose unwanted truths.⁴⁰ In 1964, several journalists raised concerns about its invasive dimensions—locating these intrusions not only in the office where the Picturephone was most likely to appear but also in the home where its installation was a distant fantasy.⁴¹ They offered words of caution or humorous commentaries about the problems videotelephony was sure to bring. “Picture this,” a *Boston Globe* article begins, “the telephone rings. A willowy blonde dashes from the shower. She picks up the phone. ‘Smile,’ the voice at the other end says, ‘you’re on Picturephone.’ The blonde disappears from view in a dead faint.”⁴² With this opening sketch, the article articulates a recurring anxiety that surrounded the device: the Picturephone’s capacity to catch you unaware and expose users’ physical appearance, facial expressions, and home to whomever is on the other end of the line.

Rather than something completely new, the Picturephone’s feared intrusiveness echoed many of the cultural anxieties that surrounded the release of the telephone in the nineteenth century. In her history of electric media and telephonic communication, Carolyn Marvin describes how, to both experts and popular writers, the introduction of the telephone seemed to threaten domestic life.⁴³ Though promoted, like the Picturephone, as a means of facilitating business communication, the new technology was embraced as a domestic medium. It blurred boundaries between private and public spheres,

AT&T Photo Service, 62-1106, 1962, and 59-417, March 1962, photographs, box 49, folder “Telephones—Picturephone—Experimental—In Settings, 1957–1971,” Collection No. 6: Bell System, AHC.

39 Western Electric, F-140, May 1965, and G-121, April 1966, photographs, box 49, folder “Telephones—Picturephone—Model I (Oval)—In Settings, 1964–1965,” Collection No. 6: Bell System, AHC.

40 For example, see Eleanor Page, “Picturephone Might Have Its Hangups,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 25, 1970, 9; and Alec Tolle, “Picturephone in Your Future,” *Indianapolis News*, February 29, 1968, 10.

41 These journalists were writing not to sell Picturephones but to reflect upon them, and thus, the tone of their articles differs from AT&T and Bell Laboratories promotional materials.

42 “Smile, You’re on Picturephone,” *Boston Globe*, May 31, 1964, 54.

43 Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking about Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 63–108.

threatening to betray intimate communication and encourage undesirable connections. The idea that anyone, regardless of race or class, could make a telephone call to anyone else seemed poised to violate boundaries and divisions essential to American, middle-class, domestic ideology. Stories circulated about cross-class and interracial courtships, as concern grew that young women would be seduced into uncontrolled and inappropriate telephonic unions with men unsanctioned by their parents. Thus, the (white, bourgeois) family—whose very stability was rooted in the insistence upon the division of insiders and outsiders—was repeatedly constructed as sacred terrain that needed to be defended from those individuals, particularly working-class and non-white individuals, whose access to electric communications gave them unprecedented capacity to intrude.⁴⁴

Although anxieties about the telephone's ability to bring strangers into the home endured with the Picturephone, the specific form of that fear changed. Unlike traditional telephones, which implied a threat of class or racial masquerade in its concealment of caller identity, the Picturephone's capacity to render users visible produced distinctly *televisual* fears of contact and exposure. Indeed, as Lynn Spigel demonstrates, the potential to be seen was central to discourses that surrounded the introduction of television to the American public. As television was heralded as a "window on the world," its capacity to give audiences access to new sights and sounds gave rise to a fear that this gaze could be turned inward, serving as a "window on the home."⁴⁵ Critics, columnists, television writers, and science fiction novelists imagined television's potential as a tool of electronic surveillance, penetrating domestic space, exposing its inhabitants, and even embodying a totalitarian "political nightmare," in which privacy was nonexistent.⁴⁶

The Picturephone mobilized long-standing fears about surveillance and exposure integral to telephony and television. As such, narratives of the unsuspecting Picturephone user, confronted with a video call moments after leaving the bath, wrapped only in her towel, merged these anxieties, framing the contact and connection promised in the Picturephone's promotion as dangerous, voyeuristic, and disciplining. Headlines such as "Picturephone Will Invade Privacy" and "Cameras Are Watching; So Try To Look Pretty" reflected on the Picturephone's power to render public what had once been private.⁴⁷ Now individuals, who previously could come home, take off their makeup, and put on a bathrobe were supposed to be "dressed and shaved at any hour from 6 a.m. to midnight" and ensure their house was "always tidy."⁴⁸

Alongside demands on physical appearances, the Picturephone also obliged new videotelephonic performances. Now that one could be both seen and heard, individuals would have to ensure they looked as well as sounded as if they were paying attention. Under this enhanced scrutiny, users would

44 Marvin, 63–108.

45 Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 118–119.

46 Spigel, 118–119.

47 Ruth Millett, "Picturephone Will Invade Privacy," *News Journal*, September 24, 1964, 39; and "Check Your Lipstick before Using New Telephones," *Fairbanks Daily News*, May 27, 1969, 6.

48 "Picturephone Zooming Ahead," *Atlanta Journal*, November 28, 1965, 53.

have to stay still and look attentively at their screens, their every movement and facial expression monitored. The ability to let one's mind wander, to paint one's nails, write a shopping list, check the mail, or mouth a comment to someone else—so essential to coping with boring or long-winded callers—would be gone.⁴⁹ Now one would have to truly listen or risk offense. As William O. Dobler, of the *Lincoln Star* warns, with the Picturephone, everyone would have to face the “frightening” reality of matching “your facial expressions with your words.”⁵⁰ Though “in face-to-face conversation,” people might be “accustomed to such a match . . . a telephone conversation can be something else. A matter in which you have no interest can produce a very bland facial expression, even though you may be treating the caller with certain verbal cordiality. What the Picturephone does is make you much more obedient to the actual reality of your face.”⁵¹ In addition to exposing inattention, the Picturephone also threatened to reveal other realities better left hidden. In a future defined by the Picturephone, conflict seems inevitable. “What happens when the boss calls and, for some reasons or other, decides he can ‘see’ that you are not working? And when the wife calls and ‘sees’ that you are not paying attention, are smoking too much or some other thing.”⁵² Or, beyond this, “Suppose hubby picks up his phone at the office only to realize, too late, that wifey is on the other end of the line and his secretary happens to be ‘too close’ to hubby in the background.”⁵³

Even if users did not worry about exposing their workplaces or marital shortcomings, the Picturephone also threatened to alter the conventions of everyday telephone interaction. With this new device, individuals could no longer bend the truth to avoid telephonic invitations or smooth over awkward interactions:

Out of the window go all the excuses . . . all the polite fictions. “Sure I’m ready to go. . . . No, we hadn’t sat down to supper yet. . . . It’s been nice chatting with you. . . . You didn’t disturb us one bit.” And out go all the ideals, when a swain sees what his date looks like two hours before date time. And the proprieties: sooner or later one is bound to answer the phone dripping and with a towel insecurely hung about one.⁵⁴

The Picturephone—with its unforgiving eye and almost panoptic power—threatened to expose realities long kept concealed and, in response, transform everyday behavior in ways more damaging than fulfilling. Confronted with video calls, individuals needed to execute not only auditory performances but also visual ones, keeping their home, their behavior, and their selves ready for televisual presentation.⁵⁵

49 Millett, “Picturephone Will Invade Privacy,” 39.

50 William O. Dobler, “In Perspective,” *Lincoln Star*, September 15, 1970, 4.

51 Dobler, 4.

52 Dobler, 4.

53 Dobler, 4.

54 “The Picturephone,” *The Sun*, May 13, 1964, 18.

55 Although Picturephone users could turn off their screens, many journalists sug-

PICTURE(PHONE)ING WOMEN

Whether emerging from Bell Laboratories publications or the popular press, discourses that surrounded the Picturephone reinforced, rather than subverted, the norms, histories, and representational practices that have long defined the gendered dynamics of both the television and the telephone. Women featured prominently in many different aspects of the device's rhetoric, depicted in advertisements and promotional materials as enthusiastic Picturephone users and envisioned as its most common victims. These ads imagined women in ways that embedded the Picturephone within the discourses of gender and power that shaped the technology's cultural and political contours.

This strategy has a long history. According to Haidee Wasson, "Women, or at least images of women, were key to the ways that . . . technologies were transformed from odd gadgets into mass-marketed, domestic objects," appearing in advertisements for cameras, projectors, radios, and TV sets.⁵⁶ The Picturephone's promotional images followed this tendency, often depicting women as both initiators and receivers of video calls. Photographs in magazine articles, advertisements, and press packets depicted users as pretty, well-dressed women—mostly young and almost exclusively white.⁵⁷ Sometimes, the women featured were simply members of the public, photographed while testing out the new device in an AT&T Picturephone booth. Other times, they were AT&T personnel. There were images of exhibition "hostesses," employed to show off the Picturephone's technical and communicative capacities, and photographs of models posing alongside the device for articles, press releases, and advertisements. Regardless of the device's practical use in these photographs, women's bodies regularly appeared on either end of the Picturephone call. They dialed numbers, looked into monitors, and appeared smiling on the phone's built-in TV screen—models of friendly, inviting, white femininity.

These promotional techniques functioned to make the Picturephone appear familiar. While the device's futuristic qualities were repeatedly underscored in the reports surrounding its release, these images embedded

gested that perhaps the absence of the video image might be as damning as its presence. This contention was confirmed by Gail Lopaze, an employee at Pittsburgh's Mercy Hospital, which had installed Picturephone service to facilitate internal communication and operations management. When asked what she would think if someone turned off his or her image, she responded, "Well, I'd wonder why . . . and I'd probably ask him about it." Cindy Skalsky, "Mr. Seims' Picturephone," *Detroit Free Press*, December 13, 1970, B4.

56 Haidee Wasson, "Electric Homes! Automatic Movies! Efficient Entertainment! 16mm and Cinema's Domestication in the 1920s," *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 4 (2009): 19, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.0.0133>.

57 For example, see Bell Laboratories, "How to Use Your . . . Picturephone Set: A New Dimension in Telephone Communications," AT&T, 1970, box 66, folder "How to Use Your . . . Picturephone Set: A New Dimension in Telephone Communications (Bell System), 1970," Collection No. 6: AT&T Corp., AHC; Ohio Bell Telephone Company, 16010-2, June 27, 1967, photograph, and AT&T Photo Service, 64-465, c. 1964, photograph, box 49, folder "Telephones—Picturephone—Model I (Oval)—In Settings, 1964–1969," Collection No. 6: Bell System, AHC; and "See You Sooner by Phone," *Illinois Bell News*, December 1958, and Western Electric, "Picturephone Advertisement," June 1968, box 94, folder 2, "Telephones—Picturephone, 1968–1969," Collection No. 5: Ameritech Corporation, AHC.

the technology within familiar, softened visions of telephonic communication. On the one hand, this advertising strategy helped align the new device with the everyday technologies and practices of domestic living. Promotional images depicted women, long conceived as the moral guardians of family life, in charge of the sanctity and spiritual wealth of the home, as the Picturephone's natural users.⁵⁸ Controlled by women, the device would, like the television and telephone, fit seamlessly into the spaces and routines of the home, helping enhance domestic life and family communication.

On the other hand, women's prominence in these advertisements functioned to embed the Picturephone in older ideas of telephonic labor, historically dominated by young women working as switchboard operators. The telephone industry insisted on the uniquely feminine qualities of telephonic labor. As Michèle Martin argues in her history of gender and the telephone industry, late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century trade publications claimed that women shaped by their "upbringing in Victorian society . . . [had] all the necessary qualities to be a perfect [telephone] operator 'gifted' with 'courtesy,' 'patience,' and 'skillful hands' . . . She possessed a 'good voice' and a 'quick ear,' and was 'alert,' 'active,' 'even-tempered,' 'adaptable,' and 'amenable.'" ⁵⁹ In photographing women's smiling faces and inviting bodies, Picturephone advertisements evoked this industrial history and reminded consumers of the feminine understanding and soothing voice that once defined telephone communication. By using images of women's bodies to promote the Picturephone, AT&T sought to both connect videotelephony with fantasies of domesticity and mobilize nostalgic ideas of the female voice and feminine labor that long defined the telephone industry.

The Picturephone's advertisements also constructed the device as a new tool for the display of the female body on screen. Now the telephone operator, secretary, or housewife—once only heard—could be seen, her body subjected to the same demands as her voice. This connection between the Picturephone and the display of the female body was so essential to AT&T's promotional strategy that it permeated even the most mundane aspects of the device's visual representation. To simplify the process of photographing Picturephones, AT&T simulated the appearance of a Picturephone call by inserting a still photograph of a woman's smiling face behind the Picturephone's glass screen (see Figure 1). These images were illuminated and then photographed, giving the appearance of a live Picturephone call. Although background photographs changed throughout the 1960s and 1970s, featuring different women whose hairstyles reflected the fashions of the day, they

58 This connection between women, morality, and domestic space stems from the nineteenth century when the bourgeois home was conceptualized as a sanctuary from the public realms of economic production and civil society. Bourgeois women, confined within the interior and barred from participating in the public sphere, were charged with keeping their houses clean and comfortable. Although over time many gendered restrictions were relaxed, aspects of Victorian domestic ideology persisted. Even in the postwar period, middle-class women were tied to the interior and the family, defined by their roles as wife, mother, and homemaker. For more see Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006); and Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, 12–18.

59 Michèle Martin, "Hello Central?": *Gender, Technology, and Culture in the Formation of Telephone Systems* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991), 59.

held certain enduring properties. They were almost exclusively images of young, pretty, white women smiling at the camera as if delighted to speak to whoever was on the other end of the line. These images made their way into advertisements, articles, service flyers, and instructional manuals.⁶⁰ Even when the Picturephone was depicted without a user, AT&T promoted the machine by placing images of young attractive women on its electronic screen, their smiling faces a visual analogue to the soothing, feminine voice long associated with the female telephone operator.

In addition to citing the history of telephony, the Picturephone's capacity to make women appear on screen was equated with an explicitly televisual desire: the wish to see oneself on TV. While this fantasy was more often implied than explicit, an advertisement from 1968 brought this desire front and center. It featured a large image of a Picturephone that positioned the viewer as the device's user. A fashionable young woman holding a telephone to her ear is shown at the center of the Picturephone screen, smiling and making eye contact with the viewer, the implied recipient. Next to this image, a caption reads, "Western Electric is Crossing a Telephone with a TV Set . . . Someday you'll be a star!"⁶¹ Through this rhetoric, the Picturephone was conceived not only as an extended telephone but also as the fulfillment of a deep-rooted televisual impulse for stardom and celebrity.⁶² Published when only the very first video cameras were being made available to consumer markets, this ad positioned the Picturephone as a kind of proxy television, a place where everyone—and especially every woman—had the opportunity to appear on screen and become a star.

These longings for fame were also invoked in a satirical 1964 *Los Angeles Times* column by Art Seidenbaum. In it, Seidenbaum predicted that the Picturephone would usher in "a whole new form of show business."⁶³ Following the Hollywood logic seemingly demanded by the Picturephone, he sketches a future in which "beautiful girls" serve as personal telephone attendants for the rich and important. He archly describes a scenario in which Billy Wilder becomes entranced with the attractive Picturephone message-takers of his business associates and decides to write a script to showcase their talents.⁶⁴ In Seidenbaum's imagination, the line between Picturephone screen and movie screen is paper thin. When visual presence is added to audio communication, he speculates that video telephonic performances of feminine beauty will

60 For example, see Bell Laboratories, "How to Use Your . . . Picturephone Set"; Bob Cisló, 70-1914-1, May 20, 1970, and Michigan Bell Telephone Photographic, 69-481-6, July 9, 1970, photographs, box 50, folder "Telephones—Picturephone—Model II (Square), 1968–1977," Collection No. 6: Bell System, AHC; Illinois Bell Telephone Co., TX-14768, c. 1964, photograph, box 49, folder "Telephones—Picturephone—Model I (Oval)—In Settings, 1964–1969," Collection No. 6: Bell System, AHC; and Illinois Bell, "Picturephone Introduction," sales kit, c. 1968, box 41, folder "Telephones—Picturephone, 1956–1981," Collection No. 2: Ameritech Corporation, AHC.

61 Western Electric, "Picturephone Advertisement." It should be noted that Western Electric was at this time a subsidiary of AT&T.

62 This impulse can be traced to television's early public demonstrations at the 1939 New York World's Fair, where RCA showed off their electronic model by having fairgoers appear on the exhibit's TV sets.

63 Art Seidenbaum, "The Picturephone—What Hath AT&T Wrought?" *Los Angeles Times*, July 12, 1964, B11.

64 Seidenbaum, "Picturephone," B11.

become standard industrial practices and preludes to future fame. As telephone answering services for rich and powerful men, the young women in his story serve both as markers of masculine importance and technologically mediated images to be consumed and gazed upon by male callers. Thus, Seidenbaum constructs the Picturephone as more than an enhancement of the telephone. With its inherent visuality, the Picturephone's performative logics and exhibitionist tendencies locate the device within a mediated technological history defined by transforming private citizens into celebrities and presenting the female body on screen.

The discourses surrounding the Picturephone's capacity for exposure were invested with gender politics. Beyond references to stardom, the desire to see women on the other end of the line appears prominently in the Picturephone's press coverage. Charles Smith of the *Clarion-Ledger* makes this desire explicit, opening his profile on the Picturephone by stating, "A pretty girl makes for a more pleasant telephone conversation. And when you can see the girl while you talk with her it becomes an intriguing situation."⁶⁵ Though less explicit, other articles repeatedly reference this capacity for female exposure, whether by describing Kathy Walsh (a young woman who thinks a Picturephone will improve her dating life) as "18 years old and blonde and . . . good-looking enough not to need blind dates"⁶⁶ or pithily comparing the Picturephone to a "call girl service."⁶⁷ Although some popular reports acknowledged that men might also worry about being caught by the Picturephone's gaze, the predominately male authors of these accounts envisioned women as the primary victims. From the woman in the *News Journal* who must keep "a mirror and make-up bar beside the phone" to the *Atlanta Journal's* teenage girl who can no longer talk to her boyfriend first thing in the morning—when she is "without makeup and in curlers, and wearing her grandmother's nightgown"—speculative narratives of women exposed by the Picturephone's obtrusive gaze peppered news reports surrounding its release.⁶⁸ Indeed, each description of a woman caught unawares is marked by notes of voyeuristic pleasure. It is no coincidence that the blonde caught in her towel is "willowy."⁶⁹ The Picturephone's capacity for voyeurism even encouraged a reporter to suggest that lonely (male) users "might try dialing some 'wrong' numbers on your picturephone" and "make some interesting new acquaintances of the opposite sex."⁷⁰ And a skeptical businessman joked that he would purchase a Picturephone only when one is installed "in Raquel Welch's bathroom."⁷¹

Alongside these more explicit accounts, descriptions of women's horror at their unclothed bodies or unmade-up faces suddenly revealed by their

65 Charles Smith, "Picturephone Uses Eyes as Well as Voice," *Clarion-Ledger*, June 23, 1973, 23.

66 Edward N. Eisen, "Picturephone User Has Only 17 Names He Can Look Up," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 23, 1970, 1.

67 George Dixon, "Picturephone, Call Girl Services Bared Together," *Pensacola News Journal*, July 7, 1964, 4.

68 Millett, "Picturephone Will Invade Privacy," 39; and "Picturephone Zooming Ahead," 53.

69 "Smile, You're on Picturephone," 54.

70 "How About a 'Picturephone'?" *Call-Leader*, June 1, 1964, 2.

71 Eisen, "Picturephone User," 10.

Picturephones reinforce the imperative for women, even more than men, to police their appearance.⁷² For many writers, the danger and the thrill posed by this new technology lay in its ability to intrude into private life and expose that which is supposed to remain hidden—particularly, the un-coiffed and undressed female body. Thus, by making domestic space visible to an outside caller, the Picturephone presented a new mode of domestic discipline. Rather than relaxing expectations of household cleanliness and personal appearance, these visions of the future expected women to further extend the management of their appearance into their private spaces. As their bodies and their homes were surveilled by the Picturephone's ever-present camera, they were subjected to heightened levels of scrutiny that demanded new forms of domestic and personal labor.

In promising to simulate face-to-face interaction and close spatial distance, the Picturephone threatened intrusion as much as it promised connection. Although this would presumably affect men and women equally, the images, promotional tactics, and journalistic discussions that surrounded the device repeatedly depicted women as those captured by the Picturephone's—and its assumed male caller's—gaze, constructed as inviting, aesthetic objects to be looked at or as victims of the Picturephone's voyeuristic promise. Whether caught in a towel, a messy living room, or winning the way to stardom with a seductive smile and courteous word, women's bodies and behaviors were at the center of this gendered rhetoric.

While AT&T's promotional imagery placed women at either end of the Picturephone call, news stories often implied men would be its chief users. In these narratives, male callers used Picturephones with relative impunity, extending their gaze into other people's domestic domains and accessing the feminine bodies and private spaces housed therein. As such, the Picturephone promised a future of intimate visibility. The threat of unexpected video calls demanded heightened attention to appearances and thrilling moments of inevitable failure, especially when directed toward women. Thus, the discourses that surrounded the Picturephone enforced gendered ideas of feminine self-presentation and masculine viewing pleasure. By adding sight to sound, the Picturephone did more than simply enrich telephonic communication. It promised to render private spaces public, offering possibilities for stardom, voyeurism, and exposure—traces of which persist in discourses and practices of today's digital media.

THE END(S) OF THE PICTUREPHONE

Despite the conviction of AT&T executives and newspaper columnists that the Picturephone would transform everyday life, the device was a commercial failure. From its earliest days, it was unable to generate a sufficient number of users. Shortly after the 1964 installation of Picturephone booths in New York, Chicago, and Washington, DC, interest in the device dwindled. While the booths had seventy-one clients during the first four months of operation,

72 This condition became a gag in the 1960s science fiction domestic sitcom *The Jetsons* (ABC, 1962–1963; 1985–1987) with the appearance of Jane Jetson's "morning mask," which sought to conceal her fatigued face and imperfect hair from the unwelcome videophone caller.

they had none when they shut their doors in 1970.⁷³ Narratives of the Picturephone's failure often indicate an incompatibility between Bell Laboratories' technological vision and consumers' needs and desires.⁷⁴ Picturephones were very expensive, requiring broadband conversion, and they seemed to demand a potentially unwanted degree of visual access. While there is undoubtedly some truth to these narratives, this explanation is too simplistic. Cost and invasiveness, though factors, were far from the only reasons for the Picturephone's failure. As Lipartito contends, promoting *any* interactive, networked technology is difficult, given that it demands a large body of users before it can appear desirable on a mass scale.⁷⁵ For Lipartito, the Picturephone's real issue was its inability to secure an active early userbase essential to the success of any technology, especially any interactive technology, stemming largely from overly cautious promotional tactics and fears of violating FCC rulings.⁷⁶ Given the eventual success of video calling technology, I am inclined to agree with Lipartito's assessment of Picturephone's failure. For me, the issue seems to be one of infrastructure. Without cultivating an enthusiastic base of early adopters or taking an initial loss to upgrade telephone systems to receive video signals, Picturephone technology could never capture a sufficient number of users to generate continued investment in the device or the widespread installation of broadband infrastructure.

Yet the Picturephone's commercial failure was not the end of its history. Its legacies extend beyond the device itself; its approaches and visions have been part of other technological developments. Both Lipartito and Mills cite the Picturephone as part of a broader history of media convergence essential to the contemporary social and cultural landscape. Lipartito sees it as an important first step in the construction of multimedia, data transmission networks.⁷⁷ Mills, furthermore, cites it within the history of "signal thinking," which treated all information (sonic or visual) as something possible for point-to-point, telephonic communication.⁷⁸ Tracing back to the Ikono-phone, she argues that this mode of conceptualizing signal transmission is integral to today's mobile phones, which send not only audio information but also images, text, and video. Alongside these technological and corporate legacies, echoes of the Picturephone's promotional and journalistic discourse persist today. These rhetorical traces appear in women's magazines that inform readers on how to look when confronted with an unexpected FaceTime call.⁷⁹ And they emerge more abstractly in the capacities for visual documentation and self-presentation that multimedia smartphones and exhibition platforms such as YouTube afford. Thus, the Picturephone, regardless

73 Lipartito, "Picturephone," 52.

74 Lipartito, 52.

75 Lipartito, 74–75.

76 Lipartito, 74–76.

77 Lipartito, 64–65.

78 Mills, "Audiovisual Telephone," 35–36.

79 Emily Gaynor, "How to Look Bomb on FaceTime," *Teen Vogue*, July 22, 2015, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/how-to-look-good-on-video-calls>; and Sue Omar, "How to Go Make-Up Free and Still Look Good on FaceTime," *ELLE*, May 22, 2017, <http://www.elleuk.com/beauty/make-up/beauty-tips/a35821/how-to-look-good-on-facetime/>.

of its failure, contributed to an enduring vision of electronic, multimedia communication. An emblem of the fantasies of human progress espoused by Bell Laboratories engineers, AT&T executives, and enthusiastic journalists, the Picturephone's communication imperative has persisted to this day, epitomized by the internet, the smartphone, and their surrounding discourses.

In addition to these digital legacies, the Picturephone has more direct rekindlings and offspring. Although AT&T abandoned any attempt to make Picturephone service available to private consumers, they shifted their model of videotelephony more explicitly toward corporate clients. In the late 1970s, AT&T launched Picturephone Meeting Service, a videoconferencing program aimed at reclaiming the Picturephone's utility.⁸⁰ Rather than selling individual Picturephones or installing public Picturephone booths, AT&T's new vision for the device placed two-way TV systems within specialized videoconference rooms designed for virtual meetings that could be rented by companies, organizations, and, in some occasions, private individuals.

AT&T conceived of these videoconferencing services as facilitating business communication and corporate management even more so than the 1960s Picturephone, but newspaper articles and press releases still emphasized the system's contribution to domestic life. Although why exactly the company chose this promotional tactic is unclear, perhaps AT&T still clung to an idea that one day Picturephones (or a similar technology) might be installed in domestic spaces. Or, more likely, they saw these stories as a means of boosting Picturephone Meeting Service's media presence in an effort to garner the interest of a wide range of potential clients. Shortly after the public launch of the service, articles appeared in AT&T's subsidiary publications—and occasionally in the popular press—about using it for personal calls.⁸¹ In these reports, videoconferencing technologies served as virtual visits, a way to see grandparents at Christmas or surprise friends on their birthdays. Notably, in 1979, Picturephone Meeting Service received a boost of promotional attention when a Detroit couple decided to transmit their wedding ceremony via Picturephone so that the bride's family could experience the event without having to travel. The wedding, described with headlines such as "Wedding Bells Ring 600 Miles by Phone," served to emphasize Picturephone Meeting Service's intimate potential.⁸² As the bride explained in a *Detroit Free Press* article, "When I was little, I thought the big church, the bridesmaids and all that was important. . . . But now I know differently. It's not the way you get married that's important—it's that you've found someone to share the rest of life with. . . . And whether it ends up on TV or not,

80 Michigan Bell, press release, December 22, 1981, box 128, folder 2, "Picturephone Meeting Service, 1980–1994," Collection No. 5: Ameritech Corporation, AHC.

81 For example, see Mike Bowen, "TV Phone Call for Christmas?," *Independent Journal*, December 1, 1980; Joe McDonough, "Face-to-Face Talk with Folks across Continent," *Update*, April 9, 1979; and Lynn Ulm, "Next Best Thing to Being There," *Update*, December 11, 1978, box 86, folder 2, "Telephones—Picturephone, 1975–1982," Collection No. 3: Pacific Telesis Group, AHC.

82 "Wedding Bells Ring 600 Miles by Phone," *Levittown Courier News*, July 2, 1979, and "Their Wedding Was 'Picture Perfect,'" *St. Joseph Herald Palladium*, July 7, 1979, box 128, folder 1, "Picturephone Meeting Service, 1975–1979," Collection No. 5: Ameritech Corporation, AHC.

that's what counts."⁸³ While not necessarily the "dream wedding" she had envisioned as a child, getting married on Picturephone allowed her and her husband to share what was most important: their love and commitment with their families.

During the 1970s and 1980s, AT&T avoided the private consumer video calling market, although other companies released still-image audiovisual telephones. However, in 1992, the company re-entered the field with the release of the VideoPhone.⁸⁴ This device cost \$1,499 and could transmit audiovisual telephone calls with full-motion video over traditional telephone lines.⁸⁵ As with the Picturephone, AT&T strove to generate public interest in the new device by installing it in public places, such as airports and train stations. While businesses would be the device's first customers, the company hoped it might eventually reach widespread public use. However, like the Picturephone, the VideoPhone was declared a commercial failure a few years after its release, seemingly another example of AT&T trying to get the public excited about a technology they did not want or could not afford.

THE TELEPHONE OF TOMORROW AND THE TENSIONS OF TODAY

Although the Picturephone never reached a wide consumer base, the dream of videotelephony endured. Its technical operations and discursive identities haunt our smartphones and digital devices, echoing directly within their video calling systems and indirectly through the other mediations of intimacy, contact, domesticity, and exposure they afford. Indeed, traces of the Picturephone emerge in the interactive live streaming of Twitch, the penchant for private exposure inherent to Instagram, and the possibilities of celebrity essential to YouTube. As such, the Picturephone—and the fears and fantasies it mobilized—cannot be dismissed as a failure or technological oddity. Instead, it represents an important conjunction of televisuality and telephony that should be considered within media histories of these technologies and their cultural legacies. The Picturephone merged the television and the telephone into a tool for live audiovisual communication and interpersonal contact, and, as such, it brought with it the hopes, anxieties, gender dynamics, and ambivalent politics that defined these devices. Studying the discourses surrounding the Picturephone offers insight not only into the history of a relatively marginal piece of experimental technology but also into television, telephony, and digital media, all of which have had undeniable impacts within twentieth- and twenty-first-century life.

The Picturephone and the debates that defined it reconfigured and intensified preexisting telephonic and televisual discourses. Instead of rupturing established norms and practices, AT&T's marketing department envisioned the Picturephone integrating seamlessly into everyday life, defending

83 Donna Britt, "Family Dialed A Wedding," *Detroit Free Press*, July 1, 1979, A2, box 128, folder 1, "Picturephone Meeting Service, 1975–1979," AHC.

84 The VideoPhone screen was a three-inch, foldout feature, attached to one side of a large push-button telephone unit. The video signal was compressed so it could be transmitted through the existing telephone system, making it low resolution.

85 For example, see Anthony Ramirez, "Consumer Videophone by A.T.&T.," *New York Times*, January 7, 1992; and Bart Ziegler, "Callers Can Reach Out and See Someone," *Detroit News*, January 3, 1992.

the family and assisting corporate America. In its promotion, the Picturephone was conceived as a means of connecting grandchildren with grandparents, husbands with wives, employers with employees, and executives with clients. It was the answer to the distance and separation experienced by families in the postwar era, as they ideologically moved from their long history as extensive assemblages to closed nuclear units, cloistered away in suburban developments. The Picturephone, with its capacity for audiovisual, intimate contact, appeared as the technological solution to the problems and isolations of suburban domesticity. Expanding upon the telephone, the Picturephone offered a simulation of connection, a virtual means of transport so that distant family members and business associates did not seem so far away.

The Picturephone's critical and sometimes dystopian narrative that circulated in the popular press also dwelled on the device's possibilities for intimate contact. Combining long-standing telephonic and televisual anxieties, these discourses constructed contact as intrusion. In this rhetoric, the Picturephone embodied a means of exposing individuals' hidden lives. Its presence rendered the private public, offering disciplinary surveillance and voyeuristic pleasures. Moreover, this seemingly essential intrusiveness was directed largely toward women. As longtime objects of the technologically mediated male gaze, women were the Picturephone's most frequent victims. With the installation of this new device, women were expected to engage in heightened levels of public performance, living ready to appear on screen, objects of masculine viewing pleasure in their own homes.

Yet the discourse that surrounded the Picturephone highlights an acknowledgment of the illusory nature of domestic ideals. In the postwar era, the emblems of the good life—the suburban home, breadwinning husband, fulfilled housewife, and dutiful children—proved to be fantasy. Not only were many communities, particularly the poor and people of color, denied access to this mode of living, but even those members of the white middle and working classes who had attained this supposed suburban dream found it lacking. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, evidence of isolation and alienation appeared everywhere. In emerging social movements, psychological studies of housewives, science fiction dystopias, and films such as *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (Nunnally Johnson, 1956), the realities of postwar domesticity were sites of anxiety and inequality.⁸⁶ When the Picturephone was released and greeted with hopes, fears, and speculations, it became another means through which to negotiate contradictions between domestic fantasy and reality.

Indeed, the Picturephone's very threat lay in its capacity to pierce the protective barrier of the home and reveal the reality behind the fantasy of the perfect nuclear family. The assumption essential to all negative accounts of the Picturephone was that its gaze would inevitably display something unwanted or untoward—a messy living room, a naked wife, a distracted husband, or an extramarital affair. As such, this rhetoric, like that of the

86 See Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 2008); and Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*, *Console-Ing Passions* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

era's science fiction or sociological research, acknowledges that the illusion of domestic perfection is known to be just that, an illusion. As this discourse makes clear, not only do men and women fail to live up to their aesthetic and domestic demands, but these shortcomings are tacitly understood by everyone. The threat and the thrill of the Picturephone thus centers on exposing these inevitable domestic failings. Combining telephonic and televisual discourses, the Picturephone became a site of conflict, where long-standing gendered, classed, and racialized anxieties, shortcomings, desires, and half-spoken truths come to the surface.

Though a product of the 1960s, the fears, fantasies, and technological possibilities associated with the Picturephone persist in today's media practices. Like the Picturephone before it, Skype and FaceTime are entrenched in rhetorics of virtual contact and familial intimacy with advertising campaigns selling video calling as a means of closing spatial distance and being together.⁸⁷ The audiovisual capacities of smartphones and computers, combined with platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and Twitch, place audiovisual sources of (live) transmission and exhibition in our homes and on our bodies. They help to further blur the boundaries between private and public life, producing new opportunities for exposure, stardom, and voyeurism. Moreover, Instagram, Facebook, and other social media have been charged with constructing a false sense of reality, producing idealized and fundamentally dishonest visions of everyday life.⁸⁸ As with those of the Picturephone, the presence of these discourses suggests an acknowledgment of the hollowness of mediated perfection and the compulsion to perform one's private life for the public. Thus, the Picturephone, though a commercial failure and seemingly marginal technological oddity, is part of a broader history of intimate and expositional media. Bringing together the telephone and television, it promised to expand these devices' capacities for contact, intimacy, intrusion, and exhibitionism. As the first commercially available video calling system, the Picturephone embodied discourses, dreams, and technological possibilities that haunt our interactions with and fantasies of media to this day.

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87 Pereira O'Dell, "Skype 'Stay Together' Campaign," January 14, 2014, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qx7Mmwntsqw>; Apple, "Group FaceTime on iPhone—A Little Company—Apple," YouTube video, accessed June 7, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D-mnvt2pDPg>; and Carlos Merigo, "Apple iPhone 4 FaceTime: Commercial," June 7, 2010, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cKoLp_lGo14.

88 For example, see R. Kay Green, "The Social Media Effect: Are You Really Who You Portray Online?" HuffPost, August 7, 2013, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/r-kay-green/the-social-media-effect-a_b_3721029.html; and Rebecca Jennings, "Facetune and the Internet's Endless Pursuit of Physical Perfection," Vox, July 16, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/7/16/20689832/instagram-photo-editing-app-facetune>.