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Becoming Spectral: Toward a Media History of Ghosting

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Abstract

This article contextualizes contemporary forms of digital ghosting by examining how two of its historical precursors—Victorian calling culture and answering machines—have been represented in North American women’s magazines. To do so, we develop *mediated avoidance* as an analytical heuristic. This concept captures the material, relational and social dimensions of a set of understudied media practices that seek to strategically engage with the gaps that are inherent in all communication, to defer, deflect, or disrupt mediated connections. Representations of mediated avoidance from respective eras were found to reflect different anxieties over the management of the public/private divide. Calling culture relied on unpaid labor to facilitate the transmission of printed messages between bourgeoisie women and was constrained by an array of social protocols that regulated interactions along conceptions of propriety. The disconnective features of answering machines, meanwhile, were represented as giving women the upper hand in courtship, as well as providing means for increased productivity and self-care, foreshadowing contemporary justifications of digital disconnection. Concerns over contemporary ghosting are discussed as produced by a spillage of media practices. Ghosting is considered acceptable in feminine-coded spheres like courtship. But it is viewed as inappropriate—sometimes even as signaling a broader social crisis—when it bleeds into other contexts, like when an employee ghosts their employer.

Keywords

media history, disconnection studies, social media, feminist media studies, ghosting

Introduction

“These are supernatural times” Adam Popescu declared on 22 January 2019, in *The New York Times*. Referring to a never picked-up latte and a non-response from his sister’s boyfriend, Popescu’s personal examples seem innocuous, but added to a growing chorus of popular and academic discourse on the phenomenon of “ghosting.” Writers, columnists, and critics have explained, analyzed, and lamented our becoming spectral for at least a decade now, asserting for instance that “ghosting is a defining millennial act . . . in lockstep with the times because it is entirely driven by new technology’s capacity to anonymise” (Haynes, 2017) while a 2023 report from the recruitment company *Indeed* garnered a frenzy of media attention in early 2024, centered around Gen Z ghosting prospective employers (see Diaz, 2024; Royle, 2024). Most of these sources connect ghosting—either via cause or correlation—to dating apps and social media (Kay & Courtice, 2022; Narr & Luong, 2023), and the majority of them agree; ghosting is bad, it’s on the rise, and it has to do with the structural conditions of our mediated lives.

In this article, we take a historical perspective on the phenomenon of ghosting, noting points of both continuity and rupture between practices of non-responsiveness in the past and the present. In particular, we focus on the mediation at stake—how and when people and things have been used as third terms to avoid contact with others—and frame these sets of techniques, technologies, and practices as *mediated avoidance*. A focus on mediated avoidance shows how screening, filtering, delaying, and ignoring are all essential parts of our mediated lives, and interference is “inherent to the process of transmission” (Krämer, 2015, p. 67), a constitutive aspect of all mediation, not its obverse. Approaching avoidance from this theoretical point of departure, makes it

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possible to study how people use media technologies to “construct and tailor silences” (Plaut, 2014, p. 38) in a wide range of contexts, not just the app-based romantic ghosting that tends to take center stage in contemporary research (Kay & Courtice, 2022; Šiša, 2022). Our conceptualization of mediated avoidance also takes into account the distinctly gendered, racialized, and classed component of avoidance; Behind the jilted lovers in many of these cases is a woman using media to protect herself from the dangers and indignities of connection in a patriarchal world, while at the same time, many people have never had the luxury of avoidance in the first place. This will become apparent as we discuss our two North American historical case studies, Victorian “calling” culture and emergent forms of call screening in the 1970s and onward. For instance, the servants, maids, and butlers who figure prominently in 19th century calling culture certainly did not have the same options for mediated avoidance as their wealthier and whiter mistresses did, while the high price of answering machines in the 1970s set the terms for who had access to technologies of mediated avoidance in the first place.

While we understand mediated avoidance to include a broad range of practices, it’s on these archetypal cases that we linger in this article, and from where we draw our source material; editorials and advice columns in women’s magazines. Through our two case studies we ask; How are acts of mediated avoidance represented, justified, and analyzed in women’s magazines? What can these magazines show us about how technologies have been used to avoid contact with others? And what can historical practices of mediated avoidance tell us about similar contemporary phenomena?

Our research shows that mediated avoidance, when practiced in established contexts, by people with specific relationships to each other, tends to be socially acceptable, while different types of people avoiding others in different contexts is cause for concern and analysis. We argue that the “media panic” (Syvertsen, 2017) around ghosting more properly has to do with the spillover of this practice out of the traditional bounds within which mediated avoidance has been accepted than with the actual screening, filtering, delaying, and ignoring at hand; that ghosting, a tried and true “relationship dissolution strategy” (Kay & Courtice, 2022) is unsettling and threatening for contemporary commentators because it is taking place in new contexts and with new actors.

Disconnection Studies

Media—especially when they are new—have long been associated with ghosts. Photography, electric light, telegraphy, phonography, cinema, radio, television, and the internet have variously been thought of as uncannily animated or as able to provide access to a deceased loved one, a mystic being, or to another plane (Marvin, 1988; Peters, 1999; Sconce, 2000; Sterne, 2003). However, the spectral romantic partners of the 21st century and their precursors in the 19th

and 20th are markedly different from these canonical examples of haunted media. The salient feature of ghosting and of our historical examples of mediated avoidance is *absence* rather than supernatural presence. New and novel forms of connection have sparked our imaginations about haunted media, but the ghosts we are concerned with—an empty inbox, a pre-recorded message, or an apologetic maid—map more closely onto conversations about *disconnection*.

In response to the increasing hyper-connectedness that characterizes the contemporary media environment (Kaun, 2021), the field of disconnection studies has emerged over the last decade. This field builds on long-standing interests in media studies as it ties together strands of research that concern non-use of technology, media resistance, and media disruption (Hesselberth, 2018), in its effort to theoretically conceptualize and empirically investigate disconnection. For the most part, scholars within the field have taken disconnection to mean disengagement from digital media technologies (Lomborg & Ytre-Arne, 2021). For example, some have studied the increased prevalence of commercially driven digital detoxing retreats (Sutton, 2020; Syvertsen & Enli, 2020) and the wellness-ideology that takes part in producing the markets for such retreats (Jorge et al., 2022). Some have engaged in critiques of this ideology, and its cultural off-shoots, like the expanding market for retro-media like vinyl records (Natale & Treré, 2020). Sociological inquiries with a Bourdieusian bent have concluded that disconnective practices are: “*socially stratified* and hence might serve as means of *distinction*” (Fast et al., 2021, p. 62, italics in original) between social classes. Others have taken a more philosophical approach to the phenomenon, and discussed the ontological possibilities of actually disconnecting from digital media systems (Bucher, 2020; Karppi, 2011; Kuntsman & Miyake, 2019) and how disconnection should be conceptualized altogether (Hesselberth, 2018). Concerning the last issue, it seems clear that while studies of disconnection from or through digital media dominate the field, the term disconnection still is quite unstable, as it can encompass all the interests mentioned above. Taking this conceptual instability as a point of departure, we intend to expand the boundaries of disconnection studies, by discussing historical examples of disconnective practices, focusing on interpersonal communication, and especially instances of what we dub mediated avoidance.

Avoidance is a topic that sometimes has been studied under that very moniker (Plaut, 2015), and other times in the context of disconnection more broadly. In studies of the latter, the term ghosting features quite prominently. This has been framed as “a new relationship dissolution or breakup strategy that uses different communication technologies as its channels” (Šiša, 2022, p. 2), that some argue has become normalized in other spheres of life—such as with one’s in-laws or with service workers—following the widespread use of dating platforms. While agreeing that the software used to dissolve relationships is new, and that disconnective

practices surely *can* play out over them—especially since the option to “unfriend” or otherwise generate negative social bonds (Illouz, 2019) between people have been built into such technologies (Kaun, 2021)—we are convinced that socially disconnective media practices by no means are *exclusive* to digital social media. Indeed, it has been noted that ghosting has media historical predecessors (Narr & Luong, 2023; Šiša, 2022), but what these disconnective practices may have looked like has not been fleshed out, which points to the presentism that to some degree characterizes disconnection studies (Lomborg & Ytre-Arne, 2021). A historicization of avoidance shows how such practices are not solely associated with particular technologies, but rather with specific negotiations of power in varied contexts. When we reflect on how people historically have utilized the capacities of media technologies to avoid others, a broader category of disconnective media practices begins to unfold. This category could be described as “mediated avoidance” signifying how one party makes use of the affordances of a media technology to intentionally avoid another.

Theorizing Mediated Avoidance

An assumption that undergirds our theorization of mediated avoidance, is that most communication in one way or another is premised on turn-taking (Peters, 1994). A speaker makes an utterance and awaits their interlocutor’s reaction, in a similar way that someone who writes a letter, sends a message on a dating app or lights a phryctoria does. In all these cases, a message travels across a distance in time and space, producing a gap in which the sender waits for a response of some kind. In much of media studies, these gaps are regarded with suspicion. Canonical theoretical models within the field see them as pitfalls that threaten to engulf messages in various kinds of noise, thus disrupting communication. This is indicative of a broader theoretical bias in Western philosophy, that tends to perceive communication as “disembodied, immaterial, intellectual contact” (Krämer, 2015, p. 71) and the ideal speaker situation as something that resembles telepathy, devoid of threatening gaps. We follow John Durham Peters (1994) instead, who has proposed that these gaps in fact are part of the very stuff that communication is made out of. Rather than regarding them as moments that precede or interrupt communication, any productive theorization of mediated avoidance has to take these gaps seriously, and pay attention to their material, practical, and sociohistorical particulars. Because as we will see, what mediated avoidance often boils down to, is strategically deployed media practices that are predicated on, and shaped by, the existence of socio-technically constructed communicative gaps.

The in-between spaces of communication are always intimately related to the materialities of a mediatic channel (Siegert, 2015). That is, what kinds of storage, transmission and processing a medium materially affords will matter for what kinds of communicative gaps they produce, and will

make some practices related to avoidance easier to engage in, and some more difficult. While important, fixing one’s eyes too firmly on the physical stuff that gaps are made of risks taking focus from the social factors that take part in constituting them. Here, we mean social in terms of human practices, but in a broader sociological sense, as well. The ways that the relations between social classes are structured in a society will impact the character of its customs, which in turn matter for when and how it is deemed appropriate for someone to make or evade contact.

Rather than thinking of media technologies as determining what kinds of avoidance can occur related to them, one should think of mediated avoidance as a relational and internally heterogeneous phenomenon. Mediated avoidance functions as an umbrella term that aims to give name to the wide array of practices that it encompasses, without flattening differences between them. To concretize, some evasive practices deflect incoming messages, perhaps by leaving a landline phone off the hook, others serve to filter incoming messages, be they letters or friend requests on social networking sites, while yet others aim to completely disrupt interpersonal connections, and others to defer or suspend them (Light & Cassidy, 2014). All these practices involve certain forms of engagements with the communicative gaps discussed above. Some aim at their expansion, others to survey and manage their boundaries, and some to rupture them completely.

The relationality of mediated avoidance signifies the networked constitution of communicative gaps, and how they are acted upon in order to avoid someone. At times, networks of avoidance can be relatively spartan, encompassing no more than two people, a door, and its peephole. Other times, avoidance is enacted by complex networks consisting of standardized forms, secretaries, telephone switchboards, servants and well-established customs. In either case, practices and techniques of avoidance will be marked by a certain aesthetic excess beyond their functionality, that will be indicative of the culture in which they are being performed (Krajewski, 2013).

This brings us to a final point. Mediated avoidance has to be understood as shaped by the context in which it is practiced. Who gets to avoid who, at what times, by which means and at what consequence, are questions with socially and historically contingent answers, that in turn will say something about the situation in which avoidance takes place (Kaun, 2021). Thus, the ways in which mediated avoidance is performed and discussed will always be marked by structures of power. And surely, the power dimensions of avoidance will be reflected in the instances when networks of avoidance are constituted and maintained by the work, paid or unpaid, of people who are neither sender nor receivers of a message. This is apparent in the case of servants, enslaved people and other “subaltern[s] of communication,” that contribute to “processes of cognitive production” (Krajewski, 2018, p. 13) from the margins of communicative situations, while never

being reimbursed for their efforts. And in other cases, mediated avoidance relies on the efforts of professionalized groups, like secretaries, to function.

Context also matters in the sense that the newness of the technology that is used to evade someone, affects how avoidance is perceived. History has shown how the emergence of new technologies that can traverse the boundaries between public and private spark anxieties, from Plato and his worries over the written word (Peters, 1994), to electronic forms of media like telephony (Marvin, 1988). But as time passes customs related to their use tend to stabilize, while never being fully determined (Bijker & Pinch, 1987). As it has been noted, users can have significant influence in re-defining the meaning of, and customs surrounding, media technologies (Pinch & Oudshoorn, 2005). This is all to say that when studying a particular instance of mediated avoidance, focusing on one specific technology does not do; the wider network of things, people, customs and social relations must be considered as well.

Method

Leaning-in to the romantic connotations of contemporary ghosting discourses, we sought out case studies which exemplified similar dynamics of avoidance in courtship protocols from different time periods. Snapshots of salience rather than a systematic treatment, this piece opens up a field of inquiry that has been neglected, is ripe for exploration, and might be consequential for studies of current modes of avoidance. We have selected two forms of courtship, “calling” and “dating” as they intersected with technologies of calling cards and the answering machine in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in North America.

Our source material is drawn from women’s magazines from two distinct periods: 1880 to 1922 and from 1975 to 2005. We searched the ProQuest Women’s Magazine Archive database, which provides access to 18 periodicals in this genre with publication dates ranging from 1846 to 2005. We also searched the American *Vogue* archive, which has issues from 1892-present, the database of the US edition of Harper’s Bazaar (1867-present), and the ProQuest Men’s Magazine Archive database, which offers back issues from seven different publications from 1845 to 1992. Keyword searches included “not at home,” “calling,” “etiquette,” “calling card,” “avoid,” “answering machine,” “eavesdrop,” “filter,” and “screen.” Doing so generated 211 relevant articles on answering machines and 173 on calling cards.

We use these magazines as a starting point for several reasons. They have been powerful actors in nineteenth and twentieth-century North America, have reflected and co-constituted dynamics of both oppression and resistance and have exemplified complex relations to other areas of culture such as “economic conditions, developments in science and technology, [and] definitions of social class” (Walker, 2000; p. x; see also Garvey, 1996; Ohmann, 1996). These magazines

have historically been very popular (Aronson, 2013, p. 31) for instance estimates indicate that “by the 1910s one in every five American women was reading the [*Ladies Home Journal*]” (Damon-Moore, 1994, p. 1), and magazine readership steadily outgrew population in the United States until 2000 (Sumner, 2010). As sites of cultural tension with significant readership and force, these are particularly interesting to jump off from in this work. Following scholars such as Lynn Spigel (1992), we consider these magazines to be important sources of historical evidence of representations and discourses about mediated avoidance, which both shaped and reflected the practices they describe (p. 2-8). Within these parameters, we have placed particular emphasis on source material which explicitly “teaches” its readers about protocols related to these practices and technologies, for instance, advice columns, etiquette editorials, and articles explicating new technologies.

“Not at Home”: Avoidance With Paper and People

Originally a French custom, the use of “calling” or “visiting” cards was popularized with upper-class North Americans of European descent by the late eighteenth century and was common until the early twentieth (Bailey, 1988; Randall, 1989). Thought to be a cultural response to the expansion of the upper class and increased geographic mobility, the “call-and-card system” enabled strangers to vet one another before allowing them into their social circle and provided a framework for socializing, jostling for position in “society” and conducting courtship activities (Earhart, 2005). This elaborate social system centered on “calls” to one another’s home in which the type of visit corresponded to one’s relationship to the hosts, and one’s place in the social hierarchy. Dropping off a piece of paper with one’s name on it—a calling card—was the first level of calling, followed by a 15- or 20-min visit in the parlor, and then, if all went well, repeated calls, invitations to teas, balls, and dinners (Randall, 1989). Calling cards—usually rectangular pieces of paper with one’s name and address printed on it—were the locus of this practice. Cards would be dropped off to initiate social relationships and courtships, to express congratulations or condolences, or as a part of a never-ending chain of calling and visiting. These cards could be simple or elaborate, could have a black border if the owner was sick or grieving, and were themselves an expression of their owner’s taste and access to funds (Earhart, 2005, p. 65). Cards would be received by a servant—butler or a maid—and would typically be placed on a silver tray in the front hall, with the cards of the most impressive callers on the top of the pile (Randall, 1989, p. 65).

Calling was a complex system. Etiquette and advice columns in popular magazines had a dizzying amount of instructions for confused callers; “a lady never leaves a card for a gentleman; so when calling on a married lady you, an unmarried girl, leave only one card” (Ashmore, 1896, p.

29), “when calling upon a friend who is visiting at a house where you are unacquainted with the hostess, you leave a card for that lady without asking to see her” (*Ladies’ Home Journal*, 1904, p. 27), “a widow’s card should be engraved with her husband’s name prefaced with ‘Mrs.’ as before his death. A Christian name following the prefix—as ‘Mrs. Mary Jones’—is provincial and used only by women who have been divorced” (*Ladies’ Home Journal*, 1904, p. 25). Women would choose specific days when they would be “at home” and then broadcast those days to her friends, acquaintances, and would-be friends and acquaintances who would then call on her (Bailey, 1988). In other instances, only a card needed to be sent which was a stand-in for a call. As an article on calling in *Harper’s Bazaar* explained, “*Her card is herself*” (*Harper’s Bazaar*, 1886).

There were plenty of ways to insult, offend, and avoid when calling. For instance, “If a lady calls in person on another lady, and the call is returned by post, or by the handing in of a card without asking for the lady, it is considered a gross affront” (*Harper’s Bazaar*, 1881, p. 14) or if a calling card should be “sent without a black border or without any other apparent good reason repeatedly in return for personal calls or in acknowledgment of invitations, we may infer that the card conveys a message of indifference to us and our hospitality from its sender” (Wentworth Sears, 1896, p. 38). Of these insults, one of the most egregious involved hearing that someone was “not at home.” Not being at home could be innocuous. It could mean that “the family are at dinner, or the lady is fatigued with the day’s work” (*Harper’s Bazaar*, 1883, p. 16). However, it could also mean something much more. If a maid were to bring the caller’s card inside and *then* say that her mistress was not at home, or if a caller was regularly “not received” when rightly the hostess should be at home, such absences spoke volumes. Not being at home could be taken as a “personal affront” (*Harper’s Bazaar*, 1883, p. 16) if the impression of “*personal exclusion*” rather than “*general exclusion*” (*Harper’s Bazaar*, 1879, p. 560) was communicated by the complex assemblage of people and paper that was calling culture. As described in this short piece of fiction in the *Ladies Home Journal* in 1913:

Four o’clock found him ringing the bell of the Henderson mansion. He smiled at the butler as he asked if Miss Henderson was in, and the butler actually smiled back as he answered that she was. Hiram stepped in and handed him a card. As Bunston saw the name he became apologetic instead of cordial. “I—I beg your pardon, sir,” he stammered, “but I was mistaken. Miss Henderson is not at home.” (Sterrett, 1914, p. 87)

In the realm of romance, unreturned calls and unreturned cards were a clear message; “If the young man persists in calling on you when you do not wish to see him simply send down word that you beg to be excused. After you have done this once or twice he will certainly comprehend” (Ashmore, 1893, p. 29).

“Not at home”—true or not—was a key way in which upper-class women of European descent exercised power in late nineteenth and early twentieth century North America (Bailey, 1988, p. 20). In a world where power was hard to come by, women controlled calling; inviting romantic or social partners to call when they wanted to be connected, evading them with absence when they didn’t. But this narrow slice of power didn’t extend far, and was unevenly distributed. Other women, lower class people, and racialized people facilitated calling. In most of these accounts, the door is opened by a butler, servant, or maid who delivers messages and handles cards. Not only did these workers not have the luxury of avoiding those they did not care to see, they themselves became part of the process of mediation; technologies of mediated avoidance together with small rectangles of paper. Calling culture would not have been possible without widespread economic disparities and racial hierarchies allowing some women to avoid who they pleased while compelling others to mediate these interactions (Krajewski, 2018). Petty or subversive, pieces of paper packed a punch, and facilitated upper-class women of European descent avoiding one another and prospective suitors in the United States and Canada in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

“A Sentry Against the World”: Avoidance With Magnetic Tape

In the latter part of the twentieth century, answering machines, rightly characterized as a medium that engendered “participation in new regimes of perpetual connection and interactivity” (Lauer, 2023, p. 3), provided novel means for mediated avoidance as well. Answering machines allowed callers to leave a voice message for the recipient using reel-to-reel or cassette tapes. Made widely available on North-American markets in the 1970s, more affordable models targeted at larger segments of the population began to be produced in the late 1980s. In the basic schema of telephonic communication, answering machines constitute technological intermediaries that automate the initiation of an off-hook state in the receiving telephone, often triggered by a pre-defined number of unanswered signals.

The technical foundations of answering machines had consequences for how they were used to avoid others. Models that made it possible to listen in on calls in real-time afforded more sophisticated acts of filtering, while those that did not screened calls *tout court*. Answering machines of the latter kind did not provide their owners with any insights into what calls they might be missing. Instead, they had to resort to listening to any eventual messages after the fact. In contrast, answering machines—models that allowed real-time listening to incoming calls afforded their owners the option to make an informed decision to be either present or absent to the person calling.

Here, then, differences in the material affordances of media technologies clearly produce different kinds of communicative gaps, and offer fairly different modes of engaging with them. Some can be used to monitor and individualize deference of connection, while others engendered more blunt varieties of avoidance. These primary disconnective capacities of answering machines served as a foundation that a series of associated practices built on, which mainly served to, in different ways, manage the boundary between private and public spheres, and organize the time of answering machine users. In order to get a more holistic grasp of what avoidance using answering machines was and meant, it is necessary to consider the aesthetic and cultural dimensions of such practices and techniques, too.

In one of the earliest mentions of answering machines in our corpus, Ellie Grossman (1979) writes about how women she has spoken to describe their machines as “a bodyguard” and “a sentry against the world” (p. 228). This language, which draws on discourses around securitization and mirrors historically familiar anxieties around increased connectivity, was prominent in our data set. It served to in various ways represent answering machines as a relay that its owner can use in order to regulate the boundary between public and private life, and how the two spheres relate to each other.

The most extreme cases concerned how to deal with “obscene callers.” In a telling example, Catherine Houck addressed her readers in a 1991 issue of *Woman’s Day* under the headline “Stop the Terror of Obscene Calls” (Houck, 1991). The article, featuring a photo of a woman in a cerise pink blouse clutching her pearl necklace with her one hand, while holding a phone to her ear with the other, encouraged readers to purchase an answering machine with a Caller ID in order to take “direct action” against unwanted sexual propositions over the telephone line. In more benign instances, women’s power to regulate when to be available or unavailable to men also featured prominently in articles on dating. Essentially, answering machines were tools that made it easier to play “hard to get,” as they allowed women to turn their availability into a scarce resource, due to the propensity of answering machines to strategically individualize absence. At one point, an article in *Cosmopolitan* even listed the answering machine as number one in a recounting of necessary items in “A single girls survival kit” (Dolgoft, 1998).

In fact, the capacity to facilitate interpersonal avoidance became such a salient feature of answering machines it was foregrounded in their marketing. In a 1988 ad in *Cosmopolitan*, Panasonic marketed their KX2386 model in North America and the United Kingdom using a photo of a woman reading a magazine at home in her pajamas. The picture was accompanied by a tagline suggesting that the depicted woman was able to relax at home thanks to her answering machine, which meant saying “goodbye to heavy breathers and heavy boyfriends” (*Cosmopolitan*, 1988, p. 147).

Besides these clearly gendered discourses surrounding avoidance, answering machines tended to be described as tools for organizing one’s own time as well. Primarily, doing so was justified by arguments centering economic rationality. Articles propagating the use of answering machines in this way were explicitly directed at self-employed white-collar women working from home. In this context, answering machines served as technologies that in one way or another undergirded entrepreneurial subjectivity. For instance, in an issue of *Good Housekeeping*, columnist Mary Hoyt discusses how she deals with stress by periodically screening all incoming calls using her answering machine, and states “I’ve found that when my mind and body listen to each other I get twice as much done in half the time” (Hoyt, 1987, p. 55). This discursive pattern recurs in several publications, where women are urged to rationalize their days, by stemming the incessant flow of incoming calls that otherwise would interrupt them in their work (Lovell, 1979), intrude on their privacy (Jacoby, 1984) or disturb dinner time with the family (Gagliardi, 1994).

Speaking more on the packaging of mediated avoidance, there were also publications describing the etiquette for what kinds of pre-recorded messages were appropriate to play for callers. The aesthetic surplus (Krajewski, 2013) of these messages, which not only fill a functional role in a communicative situation, tell us something about how mediated avoidance has to be justified to the people being avoided, in different ways at different times. Because these new ways of avoiding others indeed did not lack critics, with some even relating call screening to an arrogant impulse to “play God” (Hawkes, 1993, p. 53). So how to explain and motivate one’s absence? Grossman instructed her readers to record messages that did not simply communicate absence in a straightforward business-like manner. Instead, messages should be “cordial” and provide the caller with information not only about when but also “*how* to leave a message” (Grossman, 1979, p. 232) in order for the message left to be as informative and valuable as possible to its recipient. As answering machines were quite new on the US market at the time when Grossman’s piece was published, her writing was likely intended to alleviate some of the anxieties that people felt when calling a home with this new piece of technology (Lauer, 2023), and neatly illustrates how social protocols surrounding new media technologies develop over time, after initial periods of uncertainty and contingency.

Discussion: What Is the Use of Mediated Avoidance?

We now turn to what these cases tell us about how mediated avoidance can be applied on more general terms, and what we learn about contemporary ghosting by familiarizing ourselves with some of its precursors.

Our analysis demonstrates the fruitfulness of employing mediated avoidance as an analytical construct in several ways. It directs attention to the granular aspects of a set of communicative practices that heretofore seem to have been regarded with a certain taken-for-grantedness, that has obscured their material and social underpinnings. In the case of materiality, both cases highlight how the capacity to avoid others is predicated on the existence of networks of things and people that are arranged in certain ways. Some that rely more on the human work of “communicative subalterns” (Krajewski, 2018), and others that make greater use of mechanical automation to afford means for the navigation of communicative gaps. And importantly, not in ways that produce a sharp distinction between impressions of absence and presence or connectivity and disconnection, but through a fine-grained set of socio-technical negotiations that populate the in-betweens of such binaries.

While the concrete ways of performing avoidance using media technologies are important, they should always be studied with attention geared to the context in which they take place. This could be done by asking two questions: who finds certain kinds of connectivity to be a problem, and why do they do so? In both our cases, the answer to the first question is middle and upper-class white women. And the why, as so often before, seems highly related to concerns over how the boundaries of the public/private-binary should be managed (Marvin, 1988), albeit with different overtones. The practice of using calling cards to avoid others was embedded in a bourgeois culture deeply preoccupied with proper conduct and how one appears to others. To the call-screeners of the late 20th century, fears over sexual harassment from men, and attributes associated with an entrepreneurial subjectivity, like desire for efficiency and organizational prowess, were front of mind instead.

In neither case, the ways women used media to dodge unwanted communication challenged the social protocols and hierarchies that they were a part of in an open way. The popular magazines of respective eras described and suggested that their upper and middle-class audiences engage in these practices with little handwringing. For instance, one author prescribes, “in the busy life of our crowded period a lady must be able to deny herself.” It is this fear of making enemies, and of being misunderstood, which leads many women to say, “Not at home” (Harper’s Bazaar, 1881, p. 14) while an advice column from over 100 years later suggests “screen, screen, screen. Men aren’t stupid. Everyone is home at some point. He’ll get the idea eventually” (Gerstman et al., 1998, p. 107). In social worlds where a direct rejection is unacceptable and possibly dangerous, mediated avoidance has been a key tool through which some women have been able to (not) communicate, without ruffling feathers or directly challenging the status quo.

When we ask the same questions about ghosting in our present day, the answers appear different. The present

discourses on ghosting—in contrast from their predecessors—advocate for direct rejection with scholarly and popular sources lamenting the phenomenon. For instance, a headline in the *Guardian* declares, “What if ‘ghosting’ isn’t just rude, but psychologically harmful?” (Sales, 2023), while *Cosmopolitan* suggests, “if you’re the one currently ghosting someone? We recommend doing the right thing and sending one of these texts instead. . . .” (Shearing, 2023). Instead of being defined as a problem primarily for affluent women like its precursors, ghosting is often discussed as a phenomenon that is problematic for society as a whole. We suspect that this widespread disapproval might be due to the expansion of the practice: spillage from within the “safe” confines of feminine-coded spheres and behaviors, articulated with the frivolity associated with app-facilitated dating and hook-up culture (Weigel, 2016), into other areas of life. When the term ghosting is used to make sense of how people use new media to avoid people in contexts like employer-employee relations or those between family members, these associations travel along with, which may help explain why the emergence of this specific form of mediated avoidance sometimes is discussed as symptomatic of a broader crisis of the social.

It thus strikes us that mediated avoidance, when practiced by specific types of people—like upper/middle class white women—in specific contexts—such as romance and female friendship—is socially acceptable, while different types of people doing so in different contexts can cause deep concern. As such, practicing mediated avoidance often works within existing power structures rather than explicitly in opposition to them. While detractors of ghosting—contemporary and historical—imagine certain instances of mediated non-responsiveness as indicative of a dissolution of the social fabric, our analysis lends meager support to that thesis. Mediated avoidance instead tends to reflect and subsist on extant relations of power. This is clearly the case when paper cards with cordial messages travel between the houses of upper-class women through the work of servants or enslaved people. And the use of answering machines to “tailor silences” (Plaut, 2014) foreshadows the discourse of self-care that is prevalent in justifications for social media abstention today (Jorge et al., 2022), doing little to critique the systemic factors that cause the need for such care in the first place (Natale & Treré, 2020).

Our results partly reflect our empirical and methodological choices. The focus on homogeneous demographics have led us to primarily discuss mediated avoidance as deployed by affluent white women in North America. The historical sources we worked from and the contemporary conversations they mirror are tightly focused on the archetypical cases of mediated avoidance as they appear in popular discourses and as such were chosen to reflect the very demographics which have been most examined already. While this

is productive in terms of overarching ideas about how mediated avoidance is understood in mainstream modes of representation and discourse, by no means is this exhaustive or reflective of the likely varied and complex ways in which different populations have avoided one another with media across time and space. As we have intimated, mediated avoidance extends far beyond this narrow social stratum, and could be studied in a number of ways.

For example, what about those who are on the receiving end of avoidance, who either faithfully wait for a response on one side of a communicative gap, or intentionally attempt to abridge and close it? In the latter category, one may see lovers of the more possessive kind, phone salesmen or legal representatives attempting to serve someone papers, using a wide set of media practices to overcome the distance between themselves and an avoidant. Thinking of these actors underscores that the to-and-fro of communication by no means is a one-sided affair, but a multi-directional process shaped by relations of power.

Relatedly, one may delve into the affective and emotional aspects of mediated avoidance. The feelings provoked by rejection, abandonment, exclusion, and other forms of disconnections are subject to change over time, heterogeneous across the social strata of any given society, and intimately tied to how the relationships between them are structured (Ahmed, 2004). Just like our discussion of ghosting has suggested, besides the material composition of a medium, the meaning ascribed to it, and the customs related to it, will color how acts of avoidance are made sense of. We imagine more work being done in other contexts—non-communication across genders, relationships, ages, places, races, and so on—and hope that such studies can bring nuance and richness to the theorization of mediated avoidance.

Conclusion

But what of ghosts? The women of the 19th and 20th centuries avoided, evaded, and deferred, but they did not become spectral in the same ways as the non-responsive romantic partners, prospective employees, or family members of our digital world. And while the haunting that we have become used to in our mediated lives is importantly characterized by absence, it also strikes us that the ghosts in these machines are actually compatible with more familiar discourses around media and supernatural presence. The dream of communication (Peters, 1999)—that selves and others can commune and understand one another with clarity and immediacy—is still alive and well in the digital age, but perhaps in some ways is even more pronounced. A non-response—conceivably a simple reaction to communicative excess—is in some senses *also* a wish to be finished with the “wires” and “pipes” of the communicative process (Peters, 1999, pp. 9, 65) and to finally co-mingle, to be seen and heard and understood, to be undone and disembodied in relation to media technology. These are old dreams in new form, reminding us that ideas

about haunted media (and haunted people) are not “timeless expressions of some undying electronic superstition, but [are] a permeable language in which to express a culture’s changing social relationship to a historical sequence of technologies” (Sconce, 2000, p. 10). Indeed, while these ghosts have taken a unique form, our research shows that contemporary debates around ghosting are themselves haunted by their historical predecessors, as many of the practices, techniques, and conversations from previous centuries recur today.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, as media technologies prod at, challenge, and remake anew the boundaries between public and private, self and other, similar discursive strategies rear their heads, especially as social protocols, practices, and techniques are being established in relation to them. As we have demonstrated, mediated avoidance—one such negotiation of culture and technology—has a long history. A focus on mediated avoidance shows how disconnection in general, and practices of filtering, delaying, screening, and ignoring via media technologies in particular are not anomalous or fringe practices but are constitutive parts of communication both in the past and in the present. These practices have been accepted in some contexts—for instance, calling culture of the 1880s, or dating culture of the 1980s—but in other contexts—job seeking in the 2020s—are cause for concern and the power dynamics associated with gender, race, and class are often the determining factors between accepted and unaccepted mediated avoidance. We hope this research can be a jumping-off point for other work on avoidance in disconnection studies, and the complex ways that we negotiate both presence and absence in our mediated lives.

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