

Invisible Divide: Farm Workers and Telephone Accessibility

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Abstract

Telephones are almost universally available throughout the United States. However, farm workers and their families lack ready access to this technology. A small sample of California farm workers, vendors of telephone technology, and farm camp managers were interviewed to help understand farm worker access to and use of telephones. Results revealed a pattern of low access to and availability of telephones and major problems in the use of pre-paid phone cards. The authors argue that such communities are largely forgotten and seemingly invisible in discussions of the digital divide. Similar situations likely exist in most farm worker communities throughout the country.

Modern telephone technology is indispensable for commerce, social interaction, entertainment and recreation, and family and community security. Most Americans today have always had access to telephones, never questioning their accessibility and availability. Along those lines, Fischer (1992) has argued that while people change and adapt their lives to the new circumstances created by the telephone (or other technologies), they also adapt the technology to their lives and that such technologies "liberated, empowered, and ennobled the average American." While that reality may be true for the "average American," others in America lack ready access to telephones.

Today, accessibility to telephone technology and the benefits associated with that accessibility are unevenly distributed, creating significant social consequences for different groups. This diagnosis is supported by the following exploratory study that documented how farm workers and their families access telephone services.

The U.S. Department of Commerce (McConnaughey, Nila, and Sloan, 1995) found that Native Americans, followed by rural Hispanics and rural Blacks proportionately possessed the fewest telephones of any groups. While attention has increasingly focused on the “digital divide” (McConnaughey and Lader, 1998; Lader, 2000), rural areas continue to have lower levels of telephone (and computer) connectivity than urban areas. Although limited attention has been focused on some groups (e.g., the Federal Communications Commission’s Rural and Indian Initiatives), farm workers in the U.S. have received little, if any, attention.

Further support for this contention comes from the U.S. Department of Commerce (2001). Although this report focuses on computers and Internet use, it is relevant because statistics on Internet accessibility are related to telephone availability. The Department of Commerce report found that for the year 2000, more than 51% of all U.S. households had computer access and that 41% had Internet access. For both computer access and Internet access, the figures revealed that access was lowest for lower-income families (14%), for non-metropolitan (i.e., rural) families (31%) and for Hispanic families (24%). From these percentages, it can be inferred that farm worker families who are predominately among the lowest income groups, who largely reside in rural areas, and who are predominantly Hispanic have an even lower level of computer and Internet access. And the case may be that farm worker households also have equally low levels of telephone access.

Indeed, the large Hispanic farm worker population is a group largely forgotten and seemingly invisible in discussions of the digital divide. If the divide between rural and urban areas is wide, it appears that the farm worker population lies in a chasm, largely out of sight.

Migrant Farm Worker

Nearly 60 years ago, Goldschmidt (1947) hypothesized that the scale of agriculture (or farming) directly affected the nature of the local community, including the impacts/benefits for the farm workers who performed the agricultural work in those communities. He went on to show that farm workers in the communities studied neither shared in the returns to agriculture nor had access to what he called “basic amenities.”

Today, this reality appears to be equally true for farm workers in California. While farm workers today may be more numerous and diverse than those studied in 1947, current research (Taylor and Fix, 1997) suggests they still do not share in the economic and social

awards or have access to such basic conveniences as telephone service and associated technologies.

California is an appropriate site to attempt to document farm workers' accessibility to telephone technologies. With a farm worker population estimated to range from 400,000 to 1.5 million (Martin, 2001; Taylor et al., 1997), California hosts the largest number of agricultural workers in the nation. Studies in California (Bugarin and Lopez, 1998) and nationwide (Mehta, Gabbard, Bara, Lewis, Carroll & Mines, 2000) indicate that farm workers are primarily Latino (78%), mostly male (72%), and young with low levels of formal schooling. Seventy-five percent earn less than \$10,000 per year, and 60% have family incomes below the poverty line (Mehta et al., 2000).

In many rural areas where workers work and live, only pay phones are available, and often these are not conveniently located. Cell phones could potentially overcome this access issue. However, a credit card is usually required to purchase a cell phone, and few farm workers have such cards. Other communication services such as computer centers or telecentres could enhance accessibility (Robinson, 1998), but few rural areas in the U.S. or Mexico are adequately served by such facilities, and most are not accessible by farm workers.¹

This study attempts to understand issues related to farm workers' access to and availability of telephones. The 1997 merger of Pacific Bell and SBC Communication helped create a California Community Partnership Agreement (Pacific Bell, n.d.) with the goal of bringing communication technologies to traditionally under-served communities, including farm workers. This research was part of the planning process for reaching this goal. A prime objective was to begin to identify community issues related to telephone technology and access. A literature review revealed few relevant materials dealing with farm workers and telephones. One study found detailed a field project conducted in California by La Cooperativa (1993) which measured migrant farm worker use of a voice mail and information service during 1993. A farm labor management list serve (agbusnet@ucdavis.edu, 2001) inquiry on the use of cell phones by farm workers during working hours referenced an article (FELS, January 2001) that suggested that agricultural workers do use cell phones and that their use is creating problems for employers.

Other reports and studies recommended better telephone (and computer) services in rural areas (which also included references to farm workers), but contained no specific information or details. Web

sites usually contained advertising for pre-paid phone cards or articles on phone usage in Mexico. Multiple Web sites for rural telephone companies were identified, but all focused on the providers, their histories, and services offered. These reports and literature were all that was found.

Methodology

The data collection and fieldwork for this study were carried out in California during October, November, and December 2000. Field sites were in or near Orland/Hamilton City in the Northern Sacramento Valley, Roseville near Sacramento, and Madera and Porterville in the Central Valley. Data collection was modeled on the rapid assessment method (Finian and van Willigen, 1991). The aim was to collect information about phone accessibility and usage by migrant and seasonal farm workers. Methods included field intercept interviews of a convenience sample of farm workers, focused interviews of key informants (e.g., labor camp managers and vendors/merchants), field observations, and collection and testing of pertinent materials, e.g., pre-paid telephone cards.

Three university undergraduate students from farm worker families in the targeted communities did the fieldwork. These student researchers, each fluent in Spanish and English, also were involved in the design of the questions and data collection procedures. They were trained in interviewing techniques, data and material collection, and note taking. Fieldwork included interviews with farm workers and former farm workers (Table 1). The intercept interviews encountered workers at swap meets, convenience stores, and gasoline stations. All interviewees were originally from Mexico. Because of the nature of the intercept interviews, it was judged not possible to interview female workers. Small store vendors of calling cards and cell phones were interviewed in their stores during business hours, a condition which created some time restrictions. Of the 13 vendors, eight were male and five female. One farm labor contractor and four migrant labor camp managers in the Sacramento, Porterville, and Salinas Valley areas were interviewed by telephone. Field researchers took pictures, collected advertising literature, and tested calling cards. Each worker interview focused on access, use, and problems associated with phone use. Interviews of vendors and managers focused on such topics as sales, use, and problems.

Table 1. *Respondent characteristics*

Farmworkers	34 (all male)
Former farmworkers	7 (all male)
Vendors	13 (8 male, 5 female)
Managers and labor contractor	5 (all male)

The small, non-random sample is a limitation of this study. However, the findings are relevant to understanding the issues and challenges associated with farm worker access to telephone communication technologies.

Results

Only eight of the workers lived in state-supported camps; the others lived in rental houses, motels, or in trailers (Table 2). The four camp managers said that all of the camp living sites had access to regular phone service. They estimated that about 20% of the families had cell phones. Workers perceived a much lower number—less than 10%—of cell phone users. Temporary residents of the camps ($n = 8$) indicated that, although they have local non-cellular phone service, they do not use long distance services. Five of these residents said that, based on their work and migration patterns, they subscribe to phone services but cancel such services when they leave the area.

Single male farm workers ($n = 14$) reported that, although they live in a common house or motel, they did not get phone service because of the cost and because they are in the area for only a short time. Others who lived in local communities ($n = 15$) indicated that when they go to Mexico they cancel services and reinstate them upon their return. Only one farm worker reported having a cell phone, and he claimed to be renting it from another individual at an exorbitant cost.

Table 2. *Farm worker residence and telephone access (n = 41)*

Locations of responding workers	
State-supported labor camps	8
Motels	15
Rentals	15
Other	3
Telephone access and use	
Local phone access: no long distance	13
Encountered problems in accessing pay telephones	25
Have cell phone	1
Have purchased and used calling cards	41
Used calling card for long distance calls, including to Mexico	41
Encountered significant problems with calling cards	40
Indicated a need to have reliable and accessible phone service	41

By far the most common type of phone usage reported was pre-paid phone cards used with pay phones. Many workers (n = 25) noted the difficulty in using the cards because of access to phones where they lived.

The field researchers collected used cards aimed at the Hispanic market. Cards came in many dollar values (i.e., \$5 to \$100), with a variety of advertising/marketing themes, and many were specifically for calling only Mexico, South America, or the United States. Cards used words, symbols, and signs common to a Mexican audience. For example, cards were titled “El Matador,” “Amigo Express,” “Buenas Noticias,” “El Mexicano,” and “Don Francisco.”

Cards were readily available for purchase from a machine or across the counter. Gas stations, mini-markets, and food stores in the Porterville, Madera, and Orland/Hamilton City sites all sold cards. According to the vendors, card sales ranged from \$600 to \$800 per month in Orland, \$600 to \$2,000 per month in Hamilton City, and \$1,000 to \$10,000 per month in Madera. Certainly not all these card sales were to farm workers, but many were.

One Madera area farm worker claimed to be spending \$120 monthly to call family in Mexico, and many others reported spending from \$10 to \$30 per month to call Mexico. Considering that a large percentage of farm workers and farm worker families make less than \$10,000 per year and remit a relatively large amount to Mexico, even \$30 per month is a large amount.

All but one of the interviewees complained about what they perceived as false advertising, concealed charges, the cost/time ratio for the cards, or vending companies going in and out of business. They also uniformly reported that they did not get the minutes promised in the advertising and were unaware of and/or not informed of hidden charges. Vendors and camp managers verified the calling card problems. Complaints that the cards falsely advertised their services were common. Vendors reported that card purchasers were able, over time, to distinguish and buy cards that delivered reliable services. Workers reported they used the pre-paid cards because they were cheaper than long distance rates, despite encountering problems.

Many farm workers interviewed could neither read nor speak English and appeared to be functionally illiterate in Spanish (when asked to read phone card information). These literacy issues create severe problems for understanding the provisions of pre-paid card use. For example, connection fees and weekly surcharges were often hidden in the fine print, and buyers often could not decipher the instructions. Vendors varied in their concern about problems with phone cards. In several cases in Madera and Hamilton City, vendors worked with purchasers to decipher the fine print and help them understand how to use the pre-paid cards.

Two brands of cards to call Mexico were purchased and used to verify problems encountered by farm workers. In the first case, a bad connection was further complicated by the loss of 20 of the card's 50 minutes. With the second card and additional calls, the remaining credit could be used only with another card from the same company.

All 13 vendors claimed to know farm workers who had purchased either cell phones or pre-paid cellular phones (phones for which a pre-paid amount of service is available). The latter were preferred because they were more economical than regular cell phones. One vendor also indicated that farm workers (and others) prefer pre-paid cellular service because the purchase involves no contract, no minimum payment, and no activation charges. A vendor in

Porterville indicated that many Latinos prefer the more expensive pre-paid cellular phones over phone cards because the phones are easier to use and come with a card. Like other vendors, he also felt that pre-paid phones were preferred because purchasers did not need a social security number, identification, or a credit history. His interest in selling cards and phones was explicit: "Muestrame el dinero!" (Just show me the money!).

Discussion

The farm workers included in this study appear to be disadvantaged in regards to modern communication technology exemplified by telephones. Few appeared to have ready access to telephones which, in contemporary California, is essential for finding jobs and many public services. Availability of regular phone service for these workers appeared to be limited at best. Respondents reported not subscribing to any long distance service, using only local services. Lack of pay phone availability was often cited as a problem.

Pre-paid cards are readily available, but users appeared to be significantly and negatively affected by the cost, the lack of reliability, and perceived false and deceptive advertising. Accessibility to cell phones was severely limited by contract requirements calling for multi-year service, monthly fees, and the need to have a credit card to guarantee payment. None of the workers interviewed had credit cards or the credit history to qualify for a credit card. Some workers had access to cell phones and to pre-paid cellular phones, but only one of the 41 persons interviewed reported having a cell phone.

As a group, these farm workers and their families appeared to face unique problems relative to the digital divide. While most Californians have ready access to telephones, these farm workers do not. Questions arise as to whether these respondents are unique or whether the situation is widespread. Indeed, if the situation is wider, is it unique to California's farm workers? Or, is it found in other states in which farm workers travel, work, and live? The literature on farm workers (Rural Migration News, <http://migration.ucdavis.edu/rmn>) suggests that the general situation of workers in California is like that of workers in Oregon, North Carolina, Texas, and elsewhere. This study suggests that farm workers, because of economic, geographical, and educational reasons, do not have equal access to telephone technology.

Access will likely require more than an economic solution; social and regulatory attention is likely needed as well. Community action is also needed. The variety of actions has to go beyond the telephone, since it is only one tool. The interest in telecentres and other

forms of accessible computer centers is one encouraging direction of action. Positive examples for providing efficient telephone service may lie in other parts of the world (Reed, 2002; Quadir, n.d.) along with other forms of community, business, and government action.

In June 2001, the Universal Service Task Force and Pacific Bell, in conjunction with community organizations that operate in California's Central Valley, distributed 60 prepaid cell phones in the communities of Kerman and Sanger and pre-paid cards to 40 farm workers in Porterville and Dinuba (Trujillo, Fresno Bell, June 8, 2001). Over a three-month period, the use of the phones and services was monitored and evaluated. Regular meetings with the farm workers were held to determine benefits and drawbacks for these "customers."

That preliminary report (Aguirre International, n.d.) supports many of the findings from the study reported here. For example, results indicated that the lack of home telephones in Mexico was a major constraint to international calls; participants indicated that phone access (particularly with wireless phones) provides great advantages, including staying in touch with family, allowing workers to network with contractors and employers, and permitting fast communication in emergencies. Wireless phones also avoid the accessibility problem associated with land-line phones.

These results, although limited, point out the need for further applied research on the issues of communications accessibility for farm workers. Questions arise as how to efficiently address this lack of accessibility and inequity. One approach would appear to be to begin to develop accessible, audience-appropriate and comprehensible guides for evaluating pre-paid calling cards and services on the basis of cost, reach, and value. The opportunity exists to research, develop, and test messages and programs that target farm worker audiences. It may also be feasible to develop focused, collaborative efforts with the phone companies that operate in every community. Local vendors, like those found in small stores in these communities, can play significant roles in informing and educating. But they, along with the farm workers as consumers and those who advocate for these workers, will require support and the provision of effective teaching materials.

The essential telecommunication services available through telephones (and computers) remain at a distance from most farm workers. Increased access to such service has the potential to alter the conditions of their daily lives, giving them visibility and voice. First, however, the visibility of the actual problem has to be brought

into focus, enlarged, and acknowledged to ensure that farm workers have access to this basic amenity.

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Endnotes

¹ Verification of receipt of remittances or other matters in many of Mexico's small towns by telephone is difficult because of lack of local telephone services or "casetas" (local phones). However, two examples illustrate the drive to communicate. The senior author, in an interview conducted in Tlaxiaco, Oaxaca, Mexico, in 2000 with a

trilingual radio station, was told that the station receives more than 400 telephone requests per month from other parts of Mexico and the U.S. requesting the radio station to announce on the air for a certain person to be at a certain phone at a specific hour to receive a phone call from a family member or friend with an important message, and oftentimes messages related to remittances. Farm workers from a small Zacatecas, Mexico, village who are living in Napa, California, provide a second example (Nichols, 2002). In the last two years, three stores in Zacatecas have installed phone “casetas” that can be used to provide connections between Zacatecas and Napa. Most communication is from Mexican immigrants living and working in California to Zacatecas.

Acknowledgments

The authors acknowledge and thank Eric Grant and Ileana Winterhalter of PacBell/SBC, Gary Beall of University of California, Davis, and anonymous reviewers for their positive support, contributions, and input to this project and article.